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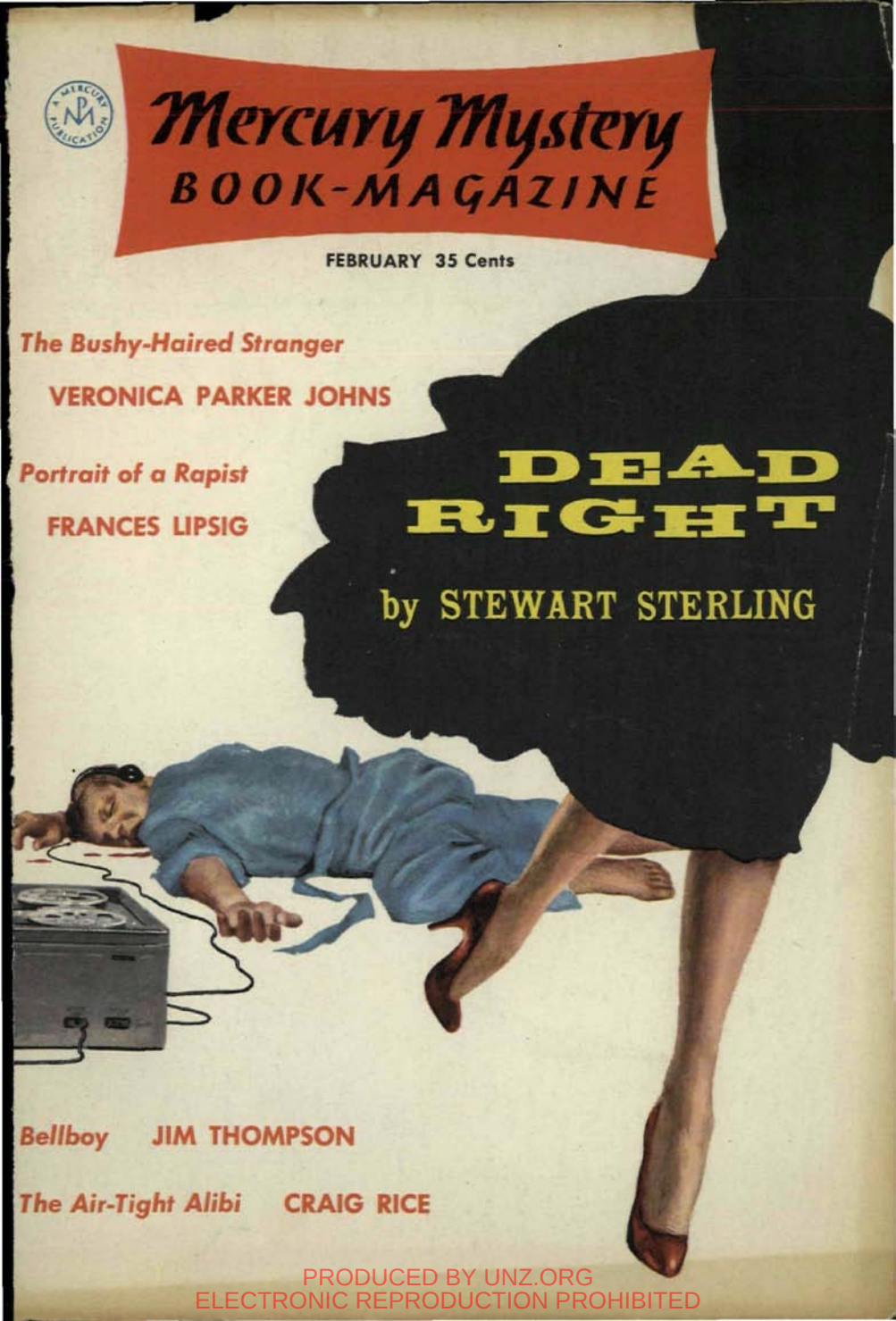
by STEWART STERLING



Bellboy JIM THOMPSON

The Air-Tight Alibi CRAIG RICE

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Mercury Mystery
BOOK-MAGAZINE

DEAD RIGHT *by Stewart Sterling* 3

A New Mystery Novel

Gil Vine spotted Mark Trevar for a phony the minute Trevar entered the Palms Plaza Hotel. *But Vine couldn't do anything to a paying guest — not, of course, unless the guest got into trouble like blackmail — or murder . . .*

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(*illustrating* DEAD RIGHT)

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Noted critic Anthony Boucher once said that "No one can beat Stewart Sterling at assimilating all the fascinating details of an unusual branch of detection." And those of you who are familiar with Mr. Sterling's many books featuring Hotel Security Officer Gil Vine, Fire Marshal detective Ben Pedley, or Harbor Police Lieutenant Steve Koski, know this to be true. Now we're happy to bring you a brand-new Gil Vine adventure — unique, exciting, different as only a Sterling book can be.

This time, the intrepid Mr. Vine is working in a luxurious Florida hotel where the beautiful girls and the beautiful money are abruptly interrupted by a very nasty bit of unbeautiful murder . . .

DEAD RIGHT

by Stewart Sterling

CHAPTER ONE

I CAN'T CLAIM any special credit for spotting this Trevar as a phony within five minutes of the time he checked into the *Palms Plaza;* any Security Chief who'd have missed that should have been sent back to patrolling corridors. The man's clothes were all wrong. He wore store-bought suits.

The class of patrons who can afford our minimum of seventy-five *per diem* for their smorgasbord and room don't stroll around in readymades unless they have figures that can really stand a suit off the racks. Trevar didn't. He was built like a beer keg with stumpy legs and short arms. The sleeve of his sport coat was so long it practically hid the glitter on the middle finger of his left hand.

I got a peek at that diamond when he signed the registration card: *Mark Trevar, Washington, D. C.* It must have been better than two carats, say a five-thousand dollar stone if the color was good. Yet the shirt he wore was a

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three dollar special, if that. It's been my experience that men who flash valuable jewelry invariably wear expensive shirts. I took a sharp squint at M. Trevar's luggage.

There was quite a bit. The porters were bringing it in from the Caddy which had zoomed him over from the airport at West Palm Beach. Couple of rawhide two-suiters; snazzy weekend case to match. Three cowhide cases, bigger than hatboxes; they'd seen quite a bit of use but there weren't any plane or steamship stickers on them. An aluminum attaché case, typewriter case ditto. Three black leather strap cases which might have been camera carriers. All quite toney; all *comme il faut*.

But his mannerisms indicated he hadn't been around much. He argued with the desk clerk about the suite which had been reserved for him; one experienced in dealing with these platinum-plated *palazzi* would have demanded to see the resident manager. Also, Trevar peeled off some singles to bonus the porters; a fellow with *savoir faire* wouldn't have thought of tipping until check-out time.

Of course, neither of these things labeled Trevar as an imposter. Far's I knew, he hadn't pretended to be anything or anybody in particular. Obviously he could pay his bill, even with cornflakes at a dime a flake; the *Palms* refuses to accept reservations without prior assurance of financial stability. Still, somehow the gentleman didn't seem to belong.

If he'd checked into our New York *Plaza Royale*, — where I'd have been except for that car smashup which had put the *Palms* Security Chief in plaster pajamas and brought a hurry call for me to wing down and take over, — I'd never have given Trevar a thought.

But as it was, I kept an ear on M. Trevar; I couldn't keep an eye on him because the man practically never left his suite. This was another point that puzzled me. For all the good he was getting out of our exclusive cabana colony or the soft, blonde beaches or the gorgeous blue and gold Florida midwinter weather, he might as well have stayed in District of Columbia sleet and slush.

He ate most of his meals in his suite; however, many of our *haute monde* prefer privacy at table. And he did his drinking — lots of it — alone. I was keeping an ear on him by listening to the floor maids, the room service waiter and Santos, the bellman.

None of them told me much but the total added up to a conundrum. He did a lot of typing; the floor maid thought he might be writing a book. I'd never heard of an author who could afford studio space at the rate of two thousand a month, so I discounted that.

He smoked expensive cigars and had them put on the Room Service checks, the waiter notified me. That made me wonder whether the gentle-

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man might not be operating on an expense account . . . since otherwise he could have saved a snug sum ordering his coronas by the box. If he was on an expense account, maybe all that typing added up to reports to somebody about something.

Santos Aliga, the good-looking Cuban bellhop who, under the *Palm's* system of Special Attention to Guest Wants, was assigned to the second floor, supplied a possible tipoff.

"He's got one of those dictating machines, Mister Vine, with one of those headsets so you can listen to the playback."

I asked him what made him think it was a dictating outfit.

"He told me so, Mister Vine." Santos grinned. "He told me off, too. I went up to deliver some of his laundry just now; he was sitting there at the table with this headset on, banging away at his typewriter. He hadn't heard me knock. I guess I startled him because he cussed me out and told me never to use my passkey to sneak in on him like that again. I didn't mean to sneak in on him."

"I know you didn't." The head-set bothered me. "Just keep that business about the dictating machine to yourself, time being."

It was around half-past ten Friday morning, when Santos spoke to me. I must have sat there in my Spanish tiled office behind the brass-studded antique desk for another half an hour, wondering how much damage Trevar might have done with his little head-set since he'd checked in Monday. I was trying to decide what, if anything, I should do about it . . . when my mind was made up for me.

The phone rang.

"House dick? Trevar speaking." Trevar had a hoarse, explosive bark.

"Vine speaking." One of my pet peeves is being called a dick. "Can I help you?"

"You can, sir, — and help your hotel at the same time. You have a dishonest bellboy working for you! Hear me? A thief!"

"Something has been stolen from you, Mister Trevar?"

"Never mind that!" he barked. "It's a small matter, but the principle's the same as if it were a thousand dollars instead of four-bits."

"You want to make a formal complaint, Mister Trevar? I'll ring the police . . ." I thought that might tone him down.

It did. "No. I'm not going to fool with any dumb cops. But you ought to fire that young thief!"

"We'll make a thorough investigation," I promised, wondering what he was after.

"Investigate, my eye!" He sounded as if he was slapping his flippers together in frustration. "Discharge him!"

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"We can't do that very well unless you make a formal complaint, sir," I said. "Or unless we have some proof."

"Suit yourselves, if you want a crook working for you. Only make sure that boy doesn't come anywhere near *my* suite again . . . or I promise you more than a complaint." He banged the receiver.

I went out to the lobby, looking for Santos; he wasn't around; no one seemed to know where he'd gone. It took ten minutes more to locate Conrad, our day-side Bell Captain: he was out at the Poinsettia Pool arranging sunbrellas.

When I reported the conversation with Trevar, Connie said "Oh" and one other word. "That guest's a lousy liar, Mister Vine. Santos is straight's a string."

"I know he is," I said. "He made this guy sore, for some reason, that's all. But you better fix it so one of the other boys covers the second, long's Trevar's in the house."

Connie looked troubled; he hurried to his desk, looked at his Errand Ledger. "Hell! Santos went up there again, just a few minutes ago." His glance moved over to the clock above the Registration Desk. "See?" He pointed to the entry:

BOY	GUEST	ERRAND	OUT	IN
Santos	*Trevar*	*P. P. Ins.*	*11:05*	....

The clock said twelve past eleven.

"He should've been back five minutes ago," Connie scowled. "Just delivering a parcel post package!"

"I'll go up." I thought Connie wanted to come along but I didn't encourage the idea.

Maybe things would have worked out better if I'd let him come. Because when I got up to El Greco and knocked, there was no answer.

Not a sound from the suite, even when I used my master key, opened up.

M. Trevar was done with barking.

CHAPTER TWO

HE LAY SPRAWLED across the green-damask sofa just to the right of the corridor door. The bold stare of the poodle-dog brown eyes made me think, for one second, that he was simply stupefied with liquor. But the gun in his

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right hand pointed to a pencil-wide ribbon of shiny red cellophane which seemed to have been fastened behind his right ear with a gray eraser. The smell of burnt powder was sharp.

Blood had run down onto the collar of his blue terry robe, which was all he had on except a pair of yellow boxer shorts. One of his *huaraches* had fallen to the carpet. His skin was almost gray in comparison with the mahogany tans I was accustomed to seeing around the lobby.

I made a fast inspection of the suite; the huge bathroom with its dressing alcove, the enormous bedroom adjoining. The twin beds were both made up; there wasn't anything strewn around; the maids had put things in order.

There were two closets in the bedroom. Neither was locked; I took a quick peek in each to make sure no one was hiding there. The closet in the living-room was locked; I was using my master key to get the door open when I heard a girl's voice, half smothered: "God! I *thought* I heard a shot!"

She stood in the corridor doorway; I'd forgotten to shut it behind me after the shock of finding Trevar's body. She wasn't much more than twenty, and pretty in a pert way. Slim and tomboyish; glossy chestnut hair that had made me think of a well-groomed filly in the Belmont paddock every time I'd seen her. Which had been once or twice a day for the past week. She was Anita Bass, the very confidential secretary to the top-drawer financier in the next suite. William Steventz, the one the papers liked to call the Consolidator.

I said: "How long ago you hear this shot?"

"Just a minute since." She took her clenched fingers away from her mouth so I could hear her. "You can't miss a pistol shot!"

"I'm the Chief House Officer, Miss Bass. Name's Vine." It wasn't much of an explanation but I didn't want to tell her I'd come up to find Santos and found a dead man instead. "Did you know this gentleman?"

She peered at the corpse in squeamish fascination. "I never saw the poor creature in my life. What a horrible thing!" She shuddered. "I don't suppose there's anything I can do . . . to help?"

"One thing, yes." I went to the phone on the credenza. "For the sake of our guests, we like to keep a disagreeable matter like this as quiet as possible." I might have told her that any death in a resort hotel causes a flurry of checkouts and a homicide can clear the house faster than a quarantine, if there's unpleasant publicity. But right then I was wondering why, if she'd heard the shot before I got there — and she must have because *I* hadn't heard it — she'd taken so long to get out to the corridor to satisfy her curiosity.

"I won't say a word, naturally, Mister Vine." She retreated to the corridor. "It's not a thing I'd care to talk about." She vanished.

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When the operator on our Private Board Exchange answered I said: "This is Gil Vine. Get hold of Matt, shoo him up here to El Greco."

She said she would.

I went back to the living-room closet. It was as big as some single rooms I've seen in Broadway flea-bags; it was made to take three or four big trunks and a flock of hand luggage. There weren't any trunks in Trevar's, but on the floor, close against the rear wall, were two of those battered tan leather cases. In front of them, near enough to be used as an uncomfortable seat, was one of the suitcases, upended.

From one of the square cases a crooked metal neck stuck up like the horn of one of those Gay Nineties Edison phonographs. The upper end flared out to a big dish-shaped diaphragm, like an old-style loudspeaker; the hollowed-out side was smack against the rear wall of the closet. The lid of the other case had been raised; I could see the pair of perforated metal wheels turning slowly, winding up the recording tape.

I went out, locking the closet door, telling myself that there'd be quite a deal of talk before this was over. Some of it would no doubt astonish the talkers.

On the center table — it was large enough to have been a directors' table in any small corporation — where Trevar had been typing was another tape recorder; the machine was hooked up to a wall plug as the others had been, but the lever was switched to OFF.

Beside the portable typewriter was a thermos of coffee, still hot; a half-empty fifth of Old Forrester and a half-full cup which had held *cafe* bourbon. A fresh sheet of bond was in the portable with a single typed line about a third of the way down:

It's no use — I'll just have to end it.

Just that. As convincing a suicide note as you could hope to find. Too damned convincing. I wondered if Santos could type, was still standing there, wondering, when Matt's basso boomed behind from the hall door.

"Well, for crisis! For crisis!! Did he push the button on himself or did you give it to him, Gil?"

Matt Gregory'd been at the *Palms* for fourteen years, ever since he was eighteen. He'd expected to replace Charley Soames when Charley got broken up in that car smash. But our Gee Em had phoned me to fly down from New York and hold the fort until Charley got back on his feet or they found another Chief. That hadn't gone down well with Matt; it hadn't made him work any too well with me, either.

He was a big, muscle-bound lunk with a double-jointed personality which made him act like a servant to the big shots and like a big shot to those of the staff he considered beneath him. The only useful thing he'd done in the

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two weeks I'd been on the job was to break up a fight in the back of the house between a meat-cutter with a cleaver and a fry-cook with a pan of boiling grease. He had so little imagination he wasn't afraid of anything.

"Things were just like this when I came in here, Matt." I didn't want to give his lame brain time to get limping. "Round up Doctor Allison. But don't tell him what's happened; just get him over here right away. Then go to that booth in the lobby, call the Chief of Police. You know him?"

"Do I know him!" Matt came over to the table. "One of my best friends." Anybody he'd met more than once was one of his best friends. "For crisis! What was he usin' a tape recorder for?"

"I haven't played the stuff back," I said as brusquely as I could. "Call your friend the Chief, ask him to send his best man around here in plainclothes."

"They don't have real plainclothesmen in this town. Over in West Palm, yeah."

"All right. Get the Chief, himself. You can say it's a death but it might have been accidental."

"How could it of been an accident? Unless . . ." a crafty gleam came into Matt's pale blue eyes, ". . . this bird was showin' off to somebody, playing Russian roulette . . . and he drew the loaded cylinder. We could tell by lookin' at the —"

"Leave the gun alone," I growled. "Get going."

He started for the door. "I don't buy that accident theory, Gil. I ain't even so sure this is suicide. You don't want to write off the chance it might be murder."

"Just don't discuss that chance with anybody." I made it an order. "Let the cops do the deciding, understand?"

He grunted, scowled importantly at the corpse and left.

I got through to our Bell Captain. "Santos around, Connie?"

"No show, Mister Vine." He was annoyed. "Been looking everywhere."

"Stop looking. Come on up to El Greco."

In the dressing room, off the bath, I found one of Trevar's summer-weight suits on hangers. In the coat was a billfold with four hundred eleven dollars in bills, a little packet of engraved cards: *Mark Trevar, Washington, D. C.*, and a box of .38 cartridges. In the trousers was two dollars and eighty-five cents in silver, a gold knife, initials *M.T.*, a cheap cigarette lighter with just *M*, and a bunch of keys on a dime-store key ring. One of the keys was new; the serrated brass edges glistened in the sunlight.

I took it off the ring, put the other stuff back where I'd found it. When I pulled out my own master key, laid Trevar's new-cut one alongside it, the peaks and valleys matched exactly.

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There were supposed to be only three of those grand master keys in existence: mine, Gee Gee Waugh's and that of the resident manager who was over in Brussels. The pass keys used by our floor maids and our room service waiters would only open the doors on a single floor. Trevar had been using one that would let him into any suite in the *Palms*. It gave me a jolt.

But nothing like the jolt Connie got a moment later when he saw the dead man:

"Oh, Jesus, Mister Vine!" he cried. "Did Santos do this?"

"Easy," I shushed him. "I don't know. It's one possibility. But I doubt it."

"But this was the joe who accused Santos! Maybe there was a fight!" Connie wiped sweat off his forehead.

"Could have been," I admitted. "More likely Trevar was dead when Santos showed up with the package. He might have become panicky, thinking everybody'd believe he'd killed the man, lost his head and hightailed away from here. Thing to do's send someone around to where he lives, get him to come back before his absence causes a lot of questions that'll be hard to answer."

"I could send Eddie," Connie nodded. "You really think it was suicide?"

"Just between us," I said, "no. This ex-guest was a private eye. Holed up here for no good. To be specific, probably spying on the big wheel in the Zuloaga suite next door."

"Steventz!"

CHAPTER THREE

"Soon's you've sicced Eddie on Santos," I told Connie, "step into Reservations, get me the folder on this fellow over there. And ask Accounting to give you all his bills to date, — everything, — room service, laundry, phones, the works."

"Right." He picked nervously at the gold braid on his jacket. "If it should turn out Santos had anything to do with this," his head bobbed toward the body, "he must have had some pretty strong provocation, Mister Vine."

I said: "Sure. Just get him back here before anybody notices he's been gone."

After Connie left I cased the bathroom again, not expecting to get much additional dope from the clothing. I'd seen the label in the summer-weight

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jacket; it was *Strawbridge & Clothier*, Philadelphia. That might have meant nothing more than that the man had stopped over in Philadelphia for a couple of hours between trains. What I was looking for was a tip from the medicine cabinet; it was there, too. A four ounce bottle nearly full of a dark brown liquid which smelled like the bottom of a garbage can. The label was helpful:

UNIVERSITY PHARMACY
1806 NEW YORK AVENUE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

. . . Mr. Trevagno . . .
one teaspoon in half a glass
of water before retiring . . .
Dr. T. C. Krech

Trevagno to Trevar. Not much of a switch. But if we couldn't locate his friends or family any other way, I thought this Doctor Krech ought to be able to steer us right.

There was nothing else.

It was clear that most of the useful information about Mark Travagno's activities — *was* his first name Mark? — would come from those strips of buff-colored tape on the recording machines. I debated with myself: should I leave them for the police to play back? Hold them out until I could tell which way the ball was going to bounce?

A house detective owes his first loyalty to the hotel; in this case my job was to see that whatever was printed in the papers or bandied about on the broadcasts wouldn't keep the haughty high-ups away from the *Palm Plaza*.

The Security Officer's second loyalty is to the guests: as far as M. Trevgno was concerned, there wasn't much I could do to help him. From what I'd seen in that living-room closet, it seemed possible the guest who really needed protection was the occupant of the suite which backed up to that microphone-*cum*-amplifier.

All I knew about William R. Steventz was what I'd read in the papers and the magazines; one of them had put him on the front cover, floating on clouds of stock proxies. The Consolidator. The Merger Magician who shuffled corporations around like a solitaire deck. Listening in on the private conversations in that Zuloaga suite might well have set up a juicy payoff in terms of knowing what securities to buy. Or sell.

Thing was, how far should I go in trying to keep whatever was on Trevagno's tape-recordings out of circulation?

Suddenly, something — or rather the lack of it — caught my eye.

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No glitter on the dead man's finger. That outsize rock was gone! Maybe he'd parked it somewhere in the suite; it might have hampered his work with the listening devices.

I made a search. It hadn't been hidden in any of the standard places a house officer learns to look for concealed valuables. I combed through the suitcases; they were locked but the keys were on his ring. The big diamond wasn't there. Those black camera-cases? I gave them the once-over; they were packed neatly with spools of the recording tape, each in a carton with dates and mysterious equations penned on the top. Such as —

1/12/56 Boom Bar—H.
Ten — LD — M.S.C.
4 C — VVP —

But no huge diamond ring.

It bothered me. In my book, temptation is relative. A bellman who'd never think about appropriating a half-dollar that hadn't been offered to him as *lagniappe* might look a second time at a five thousand dollar stone which could be had for the taking.

Connie came back with the official data on Trevar-Trevagno:

"Eddie's on his way over to West Palm, Mister Vine. I told him if he couldn't locate Santos to leave word to call you, minute he comes in."

"Fine." The Daily Charges forms showed one toll call from Trevagno every day since check-in; all to Washington. "Anybody asks you about Santos, tell him he wasn't feeling up to par, you gave him the rest of the day off."

"Yes, sir."

I waved him out, used the phone, asked Velvet Voice to find out what number in Washington Trevar'd been calling every evening.

She found out right away. "Capitol Ni-yun, ni-yun oh, ni-yun eight, Mister Vine. Station to station, he called."

"See if you can get me that number now, honey."

It took three minutes. After the Washington Long Lines operator inquired: "Is this Capitol nine nine oh nine eight?" a cautious female voice said "Yes?" as if scarcely willing to admit it.

"Who's this?" I asked.

"What party were you calling?" parried the cautious one.

"You have a Mister Trevagno with your outfit?"

A pause. "There is no one here by that name." She was really a non-commital number. "Who is this speaking?"

I gave it the rough-gruff treatment: "What company am I connected with?" — as if I was irritated.

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"I'm sorry, sir. You must have the wrong number." She disconnected.

My operator had evidently been listening in: "Do you want me to get them back again, sir?"

"No," I said. "Get me the *Plaza Royale*, see if Mona's on duty." Mona's the smart trick who supervises our eighteen-girl PBX in New York.

It was another couple of minutes before Mona came on.

"Mona? Gil. I need some dope fast and you're the gal to get it for me."

"Do my durndest, sir," she said. "Whatsit?"

"I want to know what firm in Washington, D. C. has Capitol nine-nine oh nine eight for a number."

"Ah." She repeated it. "I don't know whether the strings I can pull go as far as Washington, Mister V. But I'll try."

"Rush-rush, Mona."

"OK. I'll buzz you instanter."

A shadow moved across the carpet as I hung up. A tall, Abe Lincoln character made the shadow by circling around the couch where the body was.

He wore a white linen suit which was sadly in need of pressing, a burgundy shirt and a bow tie that looked like a pale green moth climbing up his Adam's apple. "Hi," he said offhandedly without turning around to look at me. "I'm Pete Parry."

"Captain Parry?" The side of his face I could see looked like a well-weathered cigar-store Indian.

"Lieutenant, Mister Vine." He turned; the wooden Indian effect was heightened by the odd angle of his nose where it had been broken and badly set. "What do we have here?" He held out a lean, leathered hand.

"Guest, name of Trevagno, from Washington. Registered as Mark Trevar." I damned Gregory for not getting the doctor up to the suite before this cop. "I found him like this."

"Door locked?" He glanced around the suite with what seemed like idle interest, sauntered toward the bath with a queer disjointed shamble.

"Door locked," I stated. "No one in the suite."

"Suicide, you'd say?"

"I haven't said, Lieutenant. But the man had been acting strangely ever since he came here. Sticking indoors here in his suite all day. Drinking heavily. Nobody in to see him."

Parry came back to the couch. "His gun?"

"Far's I know. Expect you can trace it," I said. "The bullet hit him where suicides do plug themselves sometimes."

"Yeah. Who was he?"

"Somebody of sufficient importance for a vice president of the Higgs

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National Bank and Trust to call up for a reservation for him." I held out the folder with the record of the phone call and our confirming letter. "He's been calling someone in Washington every evening . . . I just rang the number to make inquiries but the girl at the other end didn't admit knowing any Trevagno."

"I guess the first thing is to have a doctor look at him —"

The phone interrupted him. I tried to get to it first, thinking it was probably Mona calling back. But he beat me to it.

"Yeah?" he said to the transmitter. "Yeah, this is Mister Trevagno's suite. No . . . No, he isn't here. This is Lieutenant Parry of the Palm Beach Police. Is this a relative of Mister Trevagno?"

The party at the other end must have realized what the question signified because Parry went on after a minute:

"His employer? Oh, I see . . . well, I'm sorry to have to tell you, but Mister Trevagno died this morning . . . Yeah, that's right . . . Well, I can't make any statement as to the cause of death before the doctor — beg pardon? You'd like to talk with the gentleman who's been working with Mister Trevagno? Who?" The Lieutenant put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Lady says she'd like to talk to the house detective who'd been helping Mister Trevagno. That be you?"

CHAPTER FOUR

I TOOK THE INSTRUMENT. "This is the Security Chief of the *Palms Plaza*."

"Oh." That syllable was enough to tell me it was the cautious girl; evidently she recognized my voice, too. "What happened to Mister Trevagno?"

"We can't give out any information about that on the phone." I let my eyebrows ride up, pulled down the corners of my mouth, hunching my shoulders, watching Pete Parry. I thought he was a lot smarter than he let on. "We're not getting much information from you, either, Miss."

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "The news about Mister Trevagno shocked me so. What did you say your name is?"

"I didn't say." I could see Parry was getting more suspicious of me by the minute. "What's the gag about your man working with me?"

"We were given to understand that Mister Trevagno had an . . ." she hesitated ". . . an arrangement with the house detective there in Palm Beach. You don't know anything about that?"

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"Not a thing. I don't even know who you are. Or what your company is. Or where to ship your man's things. Of course we can get that dope from the gentleman at Higgs who fixed up the reservation, still it would save a lot of important time if you'd cooperate with the authorities." I heard Connie's rapid-fire knocking on the door and passed the buck back to Parry. "I'll let you talk to the Lieutenant again."

He took over but pivoted around as he talked, so as to watch me on my way to open up.

Connie sized the situation up in a flash. "Mister Gregory's still trying to locate Doctor Allison, sir. Would you want me to call Doctor Leventhal at the *Breakers*, in the meantime?" He held his right hand down by his side where Parry wouldn't see it; the thumb and forefinger made an *O*.

Nothing on Santos. "Thanks, Connie. We'll let Lieutenant Parry take over, now."

"Right. Doctor Allison's office says he's somewhere on the grounds, they think perhaps at the tennis courts."

"Okay. Stick around a second, see if the Lieutenant wants you to do anything."

Connie nodded; he was busting to tell me something but he had sense enough not to do it then.

Parry racked the receiver, eyeing me curiously.

"Our bell captain, Conrad . . ." I waved an introduction. "We're trying to get the house doctor here."

"Don't bother with it," Parry said mildly. "I'll have to have an official examination of the remains, anyhow."

Connie said, "Right. Lemme know if I can do anything," and whisked away.

Parry poked at his ear with the little finger of his left hand, grimacing. "Lady was kind of reluctant to give. Loosened up just enough to say that the dead gent was sort of free-lancing for a bunch calling themselves Dossier Research Associates. Specializing in personal investigations."

"I bet." I didn't much like the way he was studying me.

"Says this Trevagno had been in cahoots with the house detective down here. Couldn't tell me this house officer's name. How many are there of you?" He inspected his little fingernail.

"Five, all told," I answered. "Three of 'em are night patrols; work from eleven to seven. I have one day man. Matt Gregory, you probably know him."

"Yeah." He didn't say how well he knew him. "Think Gregory might have teamed up with this fellar?" He indicated the corpse.

"No." I had to stand up for Matt, regardless. "I don't think Trevagno'd

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made any tie-up. He probably reported he'd had to spend dough making a necessary 'contact'; all these birds play that 'contact' angle for ten times what it's worth. I'd say all the help he had came from these things." I touched the tape recorder. "If he'd tried to put the B on one of our wealthy patrons and the blackmail boomeranged, he might have thought the .38 was the easy way out."

"You hadn't heard of any trouble like that?" Parry wasn't going to take my say-so, that was clear.

"Not," I gestured at the typewriter, "unless this note had something to do with it."

He read it slowly, read it over. "Sounds like woman trouble."

"Far's I know, the only females he's seen since he's been here have been the floor maids." I thought he was more puzzled than convinced by the note. "You can have paraffin tests made of the skin on his trigger finger; it ought to show if he fired the gun himself."

"That's right." He blinked at me innocently. "How'd you come to learn he was dead, mister?"

I'd been waiting for that one. "That bell captain was trying to locate one of his bellhops before the kid went off duty. His last errand on the records was delivering a parcel post package, up here." I pointed to it. "When I got up here and knocked, there wasn't any answer. So I used my master key to open up and find out if the package *had* been delivered."

He worked on the ear again. "Makes the bellhop the last one who saw the man alive. Guess I better talk to that boy," Parry said casually. "Say he's off duty?"

"He'll be in tomorrow morning." Just as if I believed it.

"Lives around here, doesn't he?"

"Don't know his address, Lieutenant. But I can get it for you from Conrad."

"Do that." He fiddled with the switch on the recorder.

A woman's shrill voice screeched at us like a wounded panther:

"*DON'T TELL ME WHAT I'LL DO! . . . I'D DO ANYTHING IN THE WORLD to keep . . . him . . .*" it trailed to faint squeakings, to mere surface scratchings.

The Lieutenant frowned. "Say, hope I didn't put it out of commission."

The surface noises scratched on, occasionally broken up by indistinct rumblings of a deep male voice —

"*. . . to me a minute . . . flying off the . . . ahead a few . . .*"

It wasn't actually audible, more like a muffled mumbling of someone with his face buried in a pillow. What I could hear of it didn't sound as if it had much to do with mergers or stock proxies.

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Parry flipped the switch to OFF. "Wire-tap stuff. Guess it ought to be shipped back to these Research Associates of his."

"I wouldn't know how the courts rule on property rights of eavesdropping. There are a couple more cases in the closet there." I knew he'd search the suite to satisfy himself there hadn't been any robbery. "I'll unlock it," and I did.

The light went on, automatically, of course, soon as the closet door opened. He regarded the layout without much interest, apparently. But that was pure deception. "This bellhop, now. Would his pass key unlock this closet?"

"No. Only the corridor door. The maids' keys won't open the closets, either," I explained. "The hotel found out long ago that it couldn't get its guests to deposit jewelry with the front office for safekeeping so they let 'em use the closets as deposit vaults."

"All the same," he persisted, "I'd like to talk to this boy."

"I'll try to get hold of him for you," I offered.

"Sooner the better." The phone rang in the quick three that's the Security Officers hurry-up call; again he beat me to the draw. "Yeah? Yeah . . . He's here . . . who's this? . . . All right." He put the receiver on top of the credenza. "Your New York office."

I said: "Mona?"

"Your little busy bee, Mister V. Believe me, I *have* been busy. That was quite a chase you sent me on." She sounded excited.

"Why so?" I asked.

"Nobody wanted to talk. But I wormed it out of the Traffic Supervisor. All right to speak out?"

"Okay, give."

"Firm name, Dossier Research Associates. Address, Dossier Building, Eighty-two Kramer Circle. Business, wiretapping."

"Listening Toms," I glanced at Parry who wasn't trying to hide his interest in the conversation.

"They're tops at it, Mister V. Thing that made it hard to get a line on 'em; they're the crowd that's being investigated by that Senate Committee!"

"Oh-oh!" That might account for Trevagno's *nom de hôtel*, I thought. He might have been dodging a subpoena.

"They claim they've had phone company people on their payroll, Mister Vine. So nobody wants to get mixed up with any inquiries about them. Everybody's afraid of having to testify." Mona's tone was one of concern. "You haven't been bothered by any 'bugs' down there, Mister V.?"

"We're looking for the exterminator, Mona." I wasn't sure she'd figure

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that one out but I couldn't say more with Parry at my elbow. "Thanks a zillion for the tracing job."

The receiver wasn't back on the rack before Parry was asking:

"What you mean you're looking for the exterminator? You think this was a murder?"

"My gal in New York was telling me that this Trevagno worked for that beaming-receiver and induction-coil crew that's under investigation in the Senate. In the keyhole-listening trade they call all those amplifying gimmicks 'bugs'. She wanted to know if any of our phones had been tapped; I told her we were looking for an exterminator to make sure there's no eavesdropping on our patrons." I tapped the recorder on the play-back. "I don't know whether you ought to ship this stuff to Washington. Why don't you impound it, stick it away where nobody can get at it until somebody decides what to do with it?"

"It's an idea," he nodded. "While I'm fixing to do that and arrange to get remains out of here, whyn't you go round up that bellhop . . . what's his name?"

"Santos." I had to hand it to him for bulldoggedness. "I'll do my best, Lieutenant.

"See, I'll have to get his deposition before I can file the case, even if the autopsy indicates suicide." He had an afterthought. "Have to get one from you, too, just to tie up the whole ball of yarn."

"Sure. Whenever you say." I thought he wanted to get rid of me so he could fine-tooth the suite without being disturbed. *I* was the one who was being disturbed. If Santos didn't show up, the ball of yarn would be likely to unravel and make quite a tangle for me.

My intention was to get hold of Connie, *pronto*. But ten steps away from the El Greco door, Miss Bass popped out of the Steventz suite:

"Oh, Mister Vine," she called. "Please come here a minute. Mister Steventz wants a word with you."

It occurred to me, as I went in Zuloaga, that perhaps the yarn was already beginning to unravel.

CHAPTER FIVE

STEVENTZ WAS BUILT like a bulldozer, blocky, solid. His shoulder spread was chunky as the hood of a tractor; the lines of his face were square; his mouth was a thin, straight line. His sandy hair was crew cut as if it had been leveled

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off with a road scraper. He moved with a stolid assurance as if there was no need to hurry; nothing was going to stand in his way very long.

He held out his hand, not exactly smiling but showing big yellowish teeth that made me think of the radiator of a Caterpillar:

"My secretary, Nita, tells me she's talked to you about the unfortunate business in the next suite."

"That's right." I couldn't be sure whether his was the voice Parry and I had heard on that indistinct playback.

Miss Bass sat on an Andalusian settee, crossed her legs at me. Nice legs, too.

Steventz took a sandalwood humidor off the mantel over the tiled fireplace. "Havana? Good. Nita says there was a tape recording apparatus in the fellow's living-room."

"There is."

"Bastard was working a wire-tap, wasn't he." He made it a statement. "Working it on me."

"If he was listening in on anyone here in the hotel," I had to tread carefully because of the possibility of a damage suit against the house, "guests in this suite would seem to have been the logical victims."

"Seem, hell!" He stalked to an antique *escritoire*. "Read this letter. Came in the morning mail. Hadn't made up my mind what to do about it. Then Nita called me at the cabana to tell me about the man's death."

The note was on plain white bond, like that sheet in Trevagno's typewriter:

> W. Steventz, Esq.
>
> I have been conducting an investigation of Intercontinent Chemical and holding companies connected with Seacoast Magnesium, Soleil Metals and Voltamag, working for C. Clarke. The financial setup has not proved satisfactory from my standpoint, consequently I am open to any offer you may care to make for the information I have so far collected. Some of this, particularly as concerns the proposed absorption of Soleil by Seacoast, should interest you. You may contact me at the *Club Caribombo* by leaving a message for
>
> MERLE TREVAGNO

I gave it back to him. "Playing both ends against the middle. Trustworthy type."

"One of the ends caught up with him," Steventz said. "Not my end, understand. Don't say I wouldn't have dealt with him, eventually. I've

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handled snakes before. However . . . I hadn't come to any decision; the damned letter made me so sore."

Miss Bass smoothed her pale blue skirt over golden tanned knees. "Other than Mister Steventz, who originated the plan, only two people knew anything about the Soleil-Seacoast amalgamation: Herrick Duffield and I. Mister Duffield's been Mister Steventz's right bower for a number of years; I've been with him since Nineteen Fifty-two. We couldn't figure out where the leak was."

The financier put his palm down flat on the letter. "Now we know. What we don't know is how much this bastard learned. How much he's already told Charner Clarke. How much Trevagno was holding back to sell to me."

I said: "One other thing." That casual mention of Charner Clarke threw me. Gentleman in question sat in one of the choice, reserved seats of the mighty. He could have sat in on a directors meeting at least once a week, the year 'round. Besides, he came as close as any of the Grand Panjandrums to being Mr. Palm Beach himself. Socially speaking, he was both the first as well as nearly the last of the Old Guard. More important, to me, he was a close friend of Gee Gee Waugh's.

I couldn't afford to let myself be maneuvered into the spot where Trevagno evidently had put himself, where one or the other of these big boys could tag him out while he was trying to steal home on a squeeze play. "There's one more point," I repeated. "The police lieutenant in the next suite now is going to have an autopsy made on the body. If the medical examination indicates suicide, that could wrap the case up unless it gets around Trevagno was dealing 'em off the bottom of the deck in a blue chip game. Then somebody's going to mention homicide."

Steventz paced the long living-room with that curious plodding stride. "They'd naturally have to point the finger at Charner Clarke. He was the one who'd hired the man, the one who stood to lose by being double-crossed. You must realize there's a very considerable sum involved in these negotiations."

"By the same reasoning," I told him, "you'd have been the one to lose if this Trevagno *hadn't* been paid off, one way or another."

He swerved, came at me with that square jaw stuck out belligerently. "Might as well get straight. Where you stand on this?"

I stuck out my own chin a little. "On the hotel's side. We don't want any ugly publicity, Mister Steventz. If that letter gets bruited about, there'll be a lot. It'd keep the customers away in droves."

Nita Bass got up quickly, went to her boss, touched his arm. "He's so right, Bill. You can't expect him to take our side." She gazed at me solemnly. "But if the police listen to those tape recordings of conversations between

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Herrick and Mister Steventz here in these rooms, they'll begin to think there might have been a motive for murder, anyhow."

I wondered if the "Bill" had been a slip of the tongue or whether she didn't mind my knowing she was on first name terms with her employer. "No doubt of it," I agreed.

Steventz showed the radiator-teeth again. "Then you have to put a stop to it, Mister Vine."

"Out of my jurisdiction," I told him. "I suggested to Parry that he impound the stuff as evidence — but he'd already listened to a little, so I have an idea he might want to hear the rest."

They exchanged startled glances. The secretary cried: "What was on that tape?"

"The voices weren't clear," I answered. "Maybe Trevagno's amplifying apparatus went on the fritz. You couldn't hear much."

She squinted in quick suspicion; it brought dimples to her cheeks; I'd never seen a girl dimple when she scowled.

Steventz touched his inside jacket pocket. "If money'd help keep the thing quiet . . . ?"

"Wouldn't with me." I shook my head. "I'm ready to do all I can toward holding the soft pedal down, anyhow. Don't know how the Lieutenant'd feel about it. But, my opinion, he isn't the type who'd take."

"Never seen a cop who couldn't be influenced, one way or another." He set his mouth in a thin, grim line. "I'll go see what way he prefers."

"Bill." The girl scowled in disapproval. "Remember what your golf pro warned you about."

He nodded ponderously. "Don't press. I'll watch it, Nita. All I'm after is a recognition of my interest in that bird's sneak previews. They were illegal to begin with; I don't see why the law should want to make them public."

She grabbed my arm the instant the door closed behind him. "Did you really hear some of the tape recordings?"

"A little," I said. "Wonder you didn't hear it. It was tuned up twice as loud as any pistol shot. You must have pretty keen ears to hear a pistol shot through these walls."

She backed away from me. "You don't think I imagined it, do you?"

"You didn't hear it, either." I got hold of *her* arm. "You couldn't have heard a twelve-gauge shotgun, from in here. How come you knew Trevagno was dead?"

"I did, too, hear the shot," she avoided my eyes.

"Hope you don't have to convince a trial jury on that score. The prosecutor'd bring 'em up here to see what they could hear. Who else was here

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in the suite with you at the time?" It surprised me that she wasn't trying to pull away from me.

"No one."

"Who else stays here in Zuloaga?"

"Mister and Mrs. Steventz, when one or the other of them isn't on *Fancy Free*. And Herrick, when he's not flying up to New York or Chicago." Her eyes filmed with tears; maybe, I thought, she wanted me to feel like a strong-arm abusing a sweet young thing. "None of them were here when it happened. Herrick's on his way back from New York. Flo was at the cabana with Mister Steventz."

"You think a lot of your boss."

"Should say I do. Before I came with Bill I was making thirty a week in a stenographic pool for a firm of lawyers. He thought I was worth more than that and I've tried to be and he's kept giving me more responsible work to do, almost executive duties, and more pay and — why *wouldn't* I think a whole lot of him! He's wonderful!"

"His wife know how you feel about him?"

She reddened. "We've never had a personal discussion about him, Mister Vine."

There was a rapid-fire tattooing on the door. I let go her arm, opened up. It was Connie, apologetic the instant he saw the girl.

I went out in the corridor with him, closed the door. "Where *is* Santos?"

"Landlady says he packed all his things in his old Chevvy, drove to the airport to take the plane for Nassau at noon! And he told her he was never coming back to this country!"

CHAPTER SIX

CONNIE PICKED at the braid on his monkey jacket. "Santos wouldn't run out on me like that unless he'd pulled something. He knows I'm short a boy on the day side."

"If he'd pulled something," I disagreed, "he wouldn't have told anyone where he was going. One'll get you ten if he isn't still holed up over in West Palm, somewhere."

"Sure hope you're right. That Lieutenant," he indicated the El Greco suite, "is building up a head of steam about Santos."

"Don't get up a sweat about it." I clapped him on the shoulder. "If the autopsy says suicide, Parry'll forget all about Santos."

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The service elevator down the hall let out a couple of starchy Good Humor men with a rolled-up stretcher; they lugged it toward us briskly, as if we'd just ordered a pair of orange popsicles.

Connie waved them on. "Right here." He knocked on the El Greco door.

Parry put his head out. "Come ahead, boys." He beckoned them in, saw me, crooked a finger at me, too.

I went over. Connie left.

Parry cocked an eye at me. "Got to go to the hospital with the remains. Guest of yours is in here, trying to persuade me he has a prior lien on those tape recordings. I gave him 'no' for an answer but he won't take it. I better clear out before I have to fling him in the clink, for interfering with an officer. Get him out of here, will you?"

"Appreciate your going easy on him, Lieutenant." I kept my voice down. "He's a big wheel — used to rolling right over people."

Parry sighed. "He'll hit a hard curb if he tries it on the Palm Beach Police Department. We don't want any stink, though. Just take care of those tape recordings until I get back, Mister Vine."

I said I would, moved aside to let the sheet-covered stretcher joggle along to the service elevator. Parry trailed the corpse.

When I went back in El Greco, Steventz was bending over the recorder, trying to remove the spool of tape. He had two of the black camera cases under his arm. The third case was on the table beside the recorder. He glanced up at me, kept right on with what he'd been doing. "Why don't you stay out of this, Mister Vine?"

"They might have to dust that machine for fingerprints," I said mildly.

He swore, ripped the tape loose. There was a *skreek* of torn metal. "Let 'em dust." He stuffed the spool in his pocket, picked up the third case. "You ought to thank me if your prints were on it. Nita said you claimed you found this bastard's body. Maybe you know more about it than that cop thinks you do."

"You might take it up with him." I stayed planted in the doorway. "But don't try to take those spools. Police orders. Sorry."

"I have taken them." He showed the radiator-front teeth. "You told me, a few minutes ago, they were out of your jurisdiction."

"Parry just put them in my care."

He came toward me in that slow, I'm An Irresistible Force manner. "One side, if you value your job, Vine."

Vine. Not Mister, anymore. I react poorly to threats under the best circumstances. Since that stretch with the Corps on Guadalcanal, nobody I've had to face down in a hotel has done much more than make me bristle a bit.

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"I like my job all right, Mister Steventz. But I wouldn't put a high valuation on any job you could knock me out of." I made like the Immovable Object. "You don't take those spools; that's flat and that's final. You want to make something out of it, call up anybody you feel like. *But put those cases back on the table!*"

He said: "How much you want?"

"Don't tempt me," I told him, "but it's a better approach, anyway. You don't seem to get the picture, Mister Steventz. I work for the *Palms Plaza* which means that, other things being even, I work for the guests, too. You're a guest; you ought to have judgment enough to figure out I'll do my level best to see that whatever's in those cans won't be used to —"

VOOM! The door behind me swung inward, banging the back of my head.

"*Oh!* I'm so *terribly* sorry! Excuse *me!*" Mrs. Flo Steventz put her head around the jamb of the door, bubbling apologies. "I saw the door was partly open so I naturally thought it was all right to come in. I *do* hope I didn't *hurt* you."

I started to say "No harm —" but she'd forgotten all about me; she was staring at her husband and if it's possible to get pale under a deep golden tan, she went pale.

"Bill!" she cried. "What's going *on?* What's the *matter?*"

He picked the case up to give him time to recover his poise. "This damned fool's been giving me an argument, that's what's the matter. Nita told you about Trevagno?"

"That's why I came to find you, Bill." She held her hands flat against her bare midriff; she had on a scarlet top no bigger than was absolutely necessary to serve as a bra and a pair of shorts that showed plenty of the figure made famous by the Sunday Supplements and the picture magazines.

Mrs. Florence Kermyn Brundage Frost Steventz had been the photographers' friend ever since she'd been Olympic high-board champ, long before she'd divorced her second husband to marry the Consolidator. There'd been some cracks about *that* merger, at the time, but I wasn't in any mood to recall them; I was occupied in trying to figure out the byplay between them as they stood facing each other across my right shoulder.

After a moment, she whispered: "*Bill!* You *didn't!*"

He growled: "Don't be dumb, Flossy. Man shot himself, cops think. Shot before I got here, any event." He turned, planted the picked-up case on the table. "Stuff he got by wiretaps to our suite is here in these cases. By rights they're mine — my private business transactions, no matter who got 'em or how." He slammed the other cases down beside the first. "Fatheaded plainclothesman says 'Hands Off!'"

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She brushed past me, ran to him. "They're not *worth* your starting a riot about them, Bill! The little louse is dead; he can't hurt anything *now!*" She flung an arm about his shoulders.

"Stuff on those tapes might do a hell of a lot of harm, baby." He shrugged, scowled. "Oh, hell with it." He swiveled about, started for the corridor with Flossy's arm still across his shoulders.

I thought perhaps I was stretching a point but I said: "The spool you took off the machine, Mister Steventz!"

The jaw came out; for an instant those sparks showed in the ice cubes. But the corn-silk head moved quickly to his; she whispered something in his ear.

He dug down, came up with the torn-off tape, threw it on the table. She hugged him, her eyes following the spool as it rolled across to the play-back machine.

I moved away from the doorway.

He came close, held out his hand, affably enough. "No hard feelings?"

"Not on my part." I meant it. My back isn't strong enough to hold all the grudges I'd normally accumulate every year.

The ex-diving girl put out a hand behind his back as she went past me, squeezed my shoulder in what I took to be gratitude.

After they'd departed I took the torn spool and the three cases down to my office on the lobby floor. Connie signaled to me as I came through the Moorish arches and past the brass-studded leather settees which take the place of comfortable chairs in our so-called 'Spanish' decor. The signal was one forefinger crossing the tip of the other to make a *T*. Then he pointed in the direction of my office. *T* for trouble.

He was right, too. Matt Gregory was sitting in my chair, behind my desk, using my phone. He sat there in my chair while I opened the safe behind the Orozco reproduction and stowed the cases away. He was still on the phone, which might have served as an excuse for his not getting up.

When he hung up he got to his feet fast enough. "I been doin' a little bloodhounding, Gil." He said it with the air of a man who couldn't trust his associates to do anything.

"I been talkin' to Ethel, on the board."

"What about?" I thought I could guess.

"She says Trevar talks to you on the phone about Santos."

"So?" I fiddled with some personnel reports.

Matt practically pouted. "You didn't say anything about it to *me!* She claims Trevar accused Santos of bein' a thief."

"Trevar was all wrong." I could see what was coming but I couldn't see any way of ducking it. "And Santos is all right. You know that."

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"Maybe you won't think so," he announced triumphantly, "when I tell you I been hunting all over the freakin' hotel for him and couldn't find him because he snuk out around noon."

"Why were you looking for him?" I knew I had to ask.

He put down his ace. "I wanted to find out what he knows about that hunk of ice Trevar wore on his finger right up to the time you found him dead."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"MATT," I ASKED, "did it occur to you that maybe that big rock was a *fasullo?*"

It gave him pause. "A phoney? Why'd a guy who could afford half a grand a week for room rent wear a piece of paste?"

"He couldn't afford his suite," I explained as if talking to a ten-year-old. "He was on an expense account. He couldn't even afford those dollar *claros* he was having put on his room service checks."

Matt was disgruntled. "You don't go for the robb'ry angle."

"No," I said. "When that ring's found, it'll be worth about fifteen dollars . . . for the setting."

"Maybe so. But the kid might not of known that." He wouldn't give up.

I laid it on thick. "It was a nice try, Matt. But the angle, in my opinion, was despondency. This Trevagno was wanted in Washington. There was a flock of subpoenas out for him; if they'd been served he'd either have taken a contempt rap or he'd have been indicted for conspiracy to extort. Chances are, he made one last stab at cleaning up enough dough to skip to South America or the West Indies . . . and it missed. Could be he even got in deeper on the extortion business. Either way, he was sunk in the eavesdropping racket. So he took the quick way out."

"You don't want me to follow up, on Santos?"

"Santos'll show up; when he does we'll put the quiz to him." I rustled a phone memo at him. "Meantime, the wine steward's in a swivet about the returns on champagne from that Lorrilard party in the Alhambra. Mrs. Lorrilard was charged with twenty cases; only one was turned back to Georges but she claims no more than ten cases were used.

"Georges thinks ten cases would have been all the party could have put away; look into it, will you?" It would wind up with a No Overcharge

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report and a concession by the banquet manager to the old warhorse; I realized that. But it would take a while for Matt to go through the motions; meanwhile he'd be out of my hair, I *thought*.

He was reluctant to be called off the chase. "Suppose my pal Parry says it wasn't suicide?"

"Then it'll be out of our hands." I was getting tired of looking at that face. "Get a list of waiters and captains at that Lorrilard thing." I waited until he was out of earshot before I rang Connie:

"That boy who went over to West Palm . . . he around?"

"Sure," Connie said. "You want to see him?"

"In my office, right away."

"Yes, sir. An' Mister Vine; I've a message for you."

"From?"

He was cagey. "I'll send it along by Eddie."

Eddie was a bouncy little lad of thirty with a dried-up winter-apple face and the eager, inquiring eyes of a precocious boy. He handed over a square envelope of dark blue paper with *Chief of Security* written on it in white ink. Feminine handwriting. The envelope was sealed.

The notepaper was dark blue, too; in the same white ink I read:

> *I'm having lunch in the Lucullan Lounge around one. There is something I want to tell you and something I wish to ask you. You might wander by.*

The signature was *A. B.*

It wasn't hard to figure out what Anita Bass wanted to tell me; she'd have an explanation of how she'd known Trevagno was dead. But I had no idea what she might want to ask me. My wristwatch said quarter to one.

Eddie'd been keeping his eyes straight ahead in the prescribed manner.

I put the note in my pocket. "At ease, Eddie."

He grinned. "Wish I could've set your mind at ease about Santy Aliga, Mister Vine. But it looks like he's flew the coop."

"Where's he live?"

"Twenty-six Caliente Courtway. Place used to be one of those tourist traps, now it's just a rooming house. Run by a Missus Haggaty an' I *mean* accent on the Hag." Eddie grimaced.

"What time'd he get back there today?"

"Quarter past eleven, she said. He has a heap, — beat-up old Chevvy. Wouldn't take him more'n ten-fifteen minutes from here."

"No. Took all his clothes and stuff, did he?"

Eddie nodded. "Old biddy says he wasn't there more'n five minutes.

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Up to his room, down again with a foot locker, back again for a suitcase an' a couple bundles, paid her off out of a roll that'd choke an alligator, gave her that business about flying to Nassau, an' beat it."

"Wouldn't be too sure he went to the Bahamas, Eddie. Might just want to keep from being traced. Know who his particular friends were?"

"There's a bus, Rene, works on the Lanai Bar crew; they go fishing together over at a place called Sans Souci by Lantana. I wouldn't know whether they were real buddies, Mister Vine."

"All right. Whisper it not in the market place, Edward." I rang Ferencz in the Lanai:

"Bus with you, called Rene?"

"Certainly, Mister Vine." There was astonishment at the other end of the line. "Has the cabbagehead done something more stupid than usual?"

"Nothing wrong, Ferencz. Just want a word with him. Could you manage to get along without him for the rest of the day?"

"It can be arranged, *possiblement*. If it is so important . . . ?"

"It's important, Ferencz. I'm greatly obliged. Send him around to my office, will you?"

It was five to one before Rene showed. A gangly, loose-jointed youth with black hair which, by *Palm's* standards, should have been cut a week before. He was nervous at being called to the Security Office.

"Santos Aliga's a friend of yours?"

He admitted it.

"You can do him a great favor by getting hold of him as soon as you can, giving him a message from me. You're getting the afternoon and evening off, with pay, to deliver this message. If he'll show up here in the morning, I'll see he *doesn't* get in trouble. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Need any money to go scouting around?"

"Nossir. I got plenty money."

"Okay. Phone my office soon's you learn anything. Leave a message if I'm not here." I shooed him on his way.

In the Lucullan Lounge, the only girl who didn't seem to be enjoying herself was Anita Bass. She dawdled over a daiquiri and doodled on our nile-green damask with a ball-point. She'd taken a table for two behind the potted crepe myrtle tree; she wasn't interested in surveying the socialites at the other tables.

I said: "Was I supposed to have been flattered by your note?"

She looked up. "I guess so. I'm not in the habit of inviting men to sit at my table."

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"You only indicated that I'd be welcome to wander by."

"Oh, sit down." She smiled then; the first time I'd seen her smile; it was worth seeing. Her eyes crinkled; her nose wrinkled; the pert sharpness went out of her face and what was left was something to make the other Lucullan lunchers take notice.

A waiter appeared behind my chair as mysteriously as if he'd been a shadow; he knew me, of course, but gave no sign of recognition.

We ordered; he vanished behind the crepe myrtle like a genie in a puff of smoke. "Which," I asked her, "comes first? Question or statement?"

"Question," her smile disappeared. "You think that man was murdered, don't you?"

"Not for publication." I let her see I admired the chestnut-filly hairdo. "But yes."

"Then the statement is this: I'm sure of it." She leaned across the table. "Because I talked to him only a few minutes before he . . . died. What he said wasn't what a man contemplating self-destruction would have said. Neither was his manner of saying it; he seemed in very good spirits."

"When was this, Miss Bass?"

"Ten-thirty, perhaps twenty past ten. I was in the suite typing some of the data on the outstanding Soleil shares." She jabbed the ball-point at the tablecloth. "Working on Mister Steventz's business, that is . . . when the phone rang and it was this Trevagno person.

"I knew about the letter he sent to Mister Steventz; Bill had discussed with me what he ought to do about it. I'd advis him to go to this *Club Caribombo* and meet the scoundrel; nothing would be lost in going that far. But Trevagno had a last minute change of plans. He asked for Bill; I said Mister Steventz was out, would be in later, who wished to speak with him, so forth. Trevagno told me who he was and said he'd decided it would be better for Mister Steventz to come to the *Assembly Club* instead of the other. And if he did come, it wouldn't be necessary to ask for Trevagno at all; Trevagno would be there in the gambling room and would recognize Mister Steventz and would contact him between nine and ten tonight."

"Much safer from Trevagno's standpoint," I said. "He wouldn't have to disclose his identity to anyone except Steventz. So . . . ?"

"So he asked me if I thought Mister Steventz would be there. I said I thought quite possibly. And he laughed and said 'That's the sensible procedure . . . there'll be enough in this for everybody to get a good slice of the cake.' That was all . . . but he certainly didn't give me the impression of being close to cracking up."

She was in earnest, that was plain. I had to know how far the sincerity went. "How about hearing the pistol shot that you couldn't have heard?"

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"Oh, but I did!" She downed the rest of the second daiquiri as if to give her courage. "Not from the suite, though. From the corridor. I'd tried to telephone Mister Steventz at his cabana and I couldn't get through, the line was busy; I thought perhaps he'd left the receiver off the hook; he sometimes does that when he wants to think things out. Or perhaps Flo was on the phone; I've known her to talk fifteen minutes at a time. Anyhow, I thought I'd better run down to the cabana to tell him about Trevagno's call. The minute I opened the door to step out in the corridor I heard a voice calling: 'Mister Trevar . . . ? Mister Trevar . . .'."

"Our bellman, delivering a package," I said.

"It was Santos; I know him pretty well because he's been so nice about doing little errands for me. But I'd never heard the name of our next door neighbor and the minute I heard that Trevar . . . I associated it with Trevagno. Can you blame me," she asked anxiously, "for waiting to see if the man would come to the door?"

"No."

"But nobody answered, so Santos took out his skeleton key, or whatever you call it, and went in. He hadn't been in there fifteen seconds when I heard that shot. I stood there absolutely paralyzed, wondering who'd fired the revolver and why. And in, oh, perhaps another minute, Santos hurried out, shutting the door behind him and kiting down the hall as fast as he could go without running."

CHAPTER EIGHT

She stuck to a candid approach as long as I confined my questions to plain facts:

"Did you stay there with your door open? So you could see whether anyone else came out of the suite after Santos left?"

"No. I was too scared. Besides, I didn't know Trevagno was dead. Or even that he'd been shot." She frowned; the dimples did an encore. "I can't say what I would have done if I had known. After reading that damned letter, my picture of him was that he must be despicable. If I'd thought about it at all I'd probably have decided he *ought* to have been shot. And that Santos deserved a medal. Truth is, I just ran right back into our suite because I was afraid."

"Afraid your boss might be in there? Of being an unwilling witness if he came pelting out while you were watching?"

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"No." She refused the bait, went on calmly. "I've always been scared of guns and shooting, that's all. I wasn't sure this Trevagno person wouldn't come storming out and fire at Santos . . . my first thought was that somehow the bellboy'd made him mad enough for Trevagno to have taken a shot at him. It never occurred to me Bill could have been in there; I knew he was down at the Cabana Club."

"How'd you know? If you couldn't get him on the phone?"

"Why," — she was irritated then, all right, — "he *said* he was going down to tell Flo about the letter."

"He might have changed his mind." I'd always believed that oldie about a good secretary defending her boss's interests as if they were her own, but from her attitude it seemed possible Anita's interest in Steventz might be more personal than professional. "Anyhow, as far as you could testify, there might have been two or three people in the El Greco suite at the time you heard the shot."

She gazed at me reflectively. "Of my own knowledge, I couldn't say there was anyone in there except Trevagno."

"But there was some suspicion in your mind that Mister Steventz might have heard about Trevar and wondered about a name so similar to Trevagno? That your boss might have made inquiries which led to a quarrel? Perhaps a shooting?" It was deliberate needling; I couldn't figure any other way to stir her up.

"Not at all." Her cheeks seemed to be a little deeper red. "After I caught my breath and my nerves stopped jumping a bit, I realized I'd been silly to play ostrich, pretend nothing had happened. There was a chance that Santos had only run for help, would be back in a minute with a doctor or maybe a house detective. I went out to the corridor again and listened. Sure enough, I heard you coming. I ducked back inside until you'd had time to get the door unlocked and go inside. Then I came out again and peeked in to see what you were doing."

"Why didn't you put me straight on this right then, Miss Bass? Just as soon as you saw the man was dead?"

She leaned toward me once more; there wasn't any sex come-on in the movement, either. "Can't you understand? I had no right to violate my employer's confidence. If I'd let you know why I thought the man's name was really Trevagno, why I was sure he was a treacherous skunk, I'd have had to tell you about the letter."

"Why would you have had to tell me about the letter? Why couldn't you have said you happened to come out in the hall as Santos was letting himself into El Greco?"

"I simply never thought of it." She seemed ingenuous enough. "*Oh!*"

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It wasn't our waiter slipping silently out from behind the crepe myrtle this time. It was a small, slim individual in a Brooks Brothers business suit. I'd seen him with Steventz around the lobby. He'd impressed me as being the efficiency expert type of engineer, well trained in greasing the Big Wheels. Smooth, in dress, manner and speech.

"I beg your pardon, Nita." He bowed stiffly; he didn't look at me. "You must excuse me for interrupting this *tête-à-tête*. But Flo wants you at the cabana right away."

"Herrick," she covered her flustration by a hasty introduction, "this is Gilbert Vine — Herrick Duffield."

" 'Do, sir." He inspected me haughtily out of startingly blue eyes that made me think of a Siamese tomcat. His curly hair, thick and shiny as a wig of black glass, his thin, pencil-stripe mustache looking almost artfully black against the plump face which could have been moulded out of the pale-flesh plastic from which they fashion dolls, heightened the Siamese coloration effect. But there was nothing feline about his handshake; it was firm and very country club locker-room.

"You will forgive me for taking away your luncheon companion, I hope, sir?" Those blazing blue eyes said he didn't give a damn whether I forgave him or not.

I wondered how much of our conversation he'd overheard, if any. "It's easy for me to sympathize with anyone who wants to have Anita around." If she'd thought it was smart to go into that 'Gilbert' routine, I could hold up my end.

She glanced at me gratefully. "I'm sorry to miss that special *zabaglione* you ordered for dessert, Gil. I'm counting on having it . . . later." When she turned back to Duffield I thought she was frightened.

He spoke sharply. "It will have to be considerably later, Nita. We may fly back to New York this evening."

"Oh!" She was startled, distressed. "Then I'll hope to see you again, soon, Gil." She held out her hand; it seemed to me almost a gesture of appeal.

I took it for that, anyway. And did what I could to respond. "I expect Mister Duffield isn't aware that you may be required to stay here in Palm Beach until after the autopsy's completed."

The nostrils of Duffield's short nose flared; the tips of his mustache twitched. "I don't know anything about any autopsy. If Bill says you're to fly back with us this evening, you fly, Nita."

"If the police say Nita's to stay, she'll have to stay put, time being, Mister Duffield. Maybe you're not aware just why this autopsy's so important; I'd better tell you."

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"I regret seeming rude," Duffield was trying to hold his temper, "but time is limited." He took her arm firmly. "You'll excuse us . . ."

He tugged her toward the Palmetto Walk. I went along.

She said: "You don't understand, Herrick. Gil is the Security Officer of the hotel. He is as anxious to keep the thing hushed up as we are."

He said nothing eloquently.

I said: "All I have in mind is to save your party possible embarrassment, Mister Duffield. If the newspapers get wind of the fact that Mister Steventz or his wife or secretary had to be stopped at the airport by police orders, you wouldn't like it."

Nita tugged at Duffield's arm. "Use some sense, Herrick. Bill wouldn't want to antagonize —"

"Is it absolutely necessary," he said icily, "for you to divulge all our problems to this . . ." he was going to say housedick but he resisted the impulse ". . . this house officer?"

I said I was already fairly familiar with those problems which had developed out of Trevagno's death.

He muttered: "Do you really think so!" stalking on past the gaudy awnings of the lower and more expensive row of cabanas.

In the one bearing the glass panel with the gold leaf informing the surf-fanciers that here loafed the clan of STEVENTZ, Florence Steventz was giving a feline performance of her own. Long before the three of us got within earshot, I could see her pacing back and forth under the peppermint striped awning like a leopard in a cage at the zoo. She had a highball glass in one hand; every couple of swings across the front of the cabana and back again she'd take a pull at the drink.

Duffield straightened like a grenadier guard at the edge of the sacred precincts. "You'll permit us to continue our conference in private, Mister Vine."

He had me there. A guest's cabana is like his suite. I couldn't force my way in unless there was some legitimate reason.

But Mrs. Steventz provided it, as soon as she spied me. "Oh! the house detective! Thank the Lord! You're just the man we want! Come in . . . *do* come in."

Nita was as confused as I was.

I followed her in, Duffield breathing down my neck:

"Careful, Florence!" he warned. "Bill might not like you to speak too freely!"

She ignored him. "Sit down, Mister Vine. Bill's gone to look for you. He'll be back directly. Flop right down *anywhere*. Have a drink? *What'll* you have?"

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"Too soon after lunch, but thanks." I wondered what the hell —

"Nita," Mrs. Steventz cried, "you won't believe it; it's incredible!"

"What is, Flo?" Nita tried to sound soothing.

"That man! That rat, Trevagno." The ex-high board champion of the world tilted her glass bottoms up, draining the last drop. "He called up here, half an hour ago . . . to ask if Bill meant to meet him tonight at the *Assembly!* !"

CHAPTER NINE

"He couldn't have," Nita said sharply. "He's dead."

Florence slumped moodily onto a chaise. "You say so. Bill says so. But I tell you I spoke to a man who claims he was the one who wrote the note. I asked him what his name was; — he said he was Merle Trevagno."

Duffield went to the portable bar, rattled ice cubes around. "As I told you, Flo, it must have been some chiseler who'd been working with this wire-tapper. Think, now. Did he sound like a young man? Middle-aged?"

"Bill talked to him longer than I did." Florence held out her glass for a refill. "But from what I heard of it, the voice was on the youngish side. Yes, *definitely*."

Nita was cross. "Well, Trevagno wasn't what you'd call a young man."

"No. And now I think about it," Florence murmured, "there was some peculiarity about that voice . . . an accent of some kind perhaps . . . didn't that bellboy on our floor have a sort of accent?"

"Santos?" I told myself that would really cook the kid, if he could be tied into the extortion attempt.

"Yes." Florence rubbed lotion on her shapely thigh, absently. "Yet it *couldn't* have been Santos," she brooded. "He wouldn't have *had* to make an appointment with Bill. He *sees* Bill three or four times a day, anyhow."

"Moreover," I pointed out, "Santos would be aware your husband would recognize him at this rendezvous. He'd probably have been afraid Mister Steventz would recognize his voice on the phone."

Duffield held out her highball. "What'd Bill tell him?"

Florence took the glass from him. "He said yes, he'd meet the fellow at the *Assembly* tonight."

Duffield tweaked his tomcat mustache. "Godsake, if I'd known I was going to crashland in a hassle like this, I'd have done better to stay in New York."

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I asked when he'd gotten to Palm Beach.

"Touched down at West Palm around quarter past twelve." He favored me with a blank stare from the Siamese eyes. "I'd have been here an hour earlier except I had to make an emergency at Brunswick; leak in my fuel lines. I didn't get away from the field there until quarter past eleven. If I'd had any idea all our carefully guarded plans were being tipped off to Charner Clarke —" he shrugged, in disgust.

Nita dropped into one of those low-slung chairs the *Palms Plaza* furniture shop makes out of Seminole baskets. "Nobody knows how much of a tipoff there's been. Could be there hasn't been any of importance. This Trevagno might have been waiting to see whether Bill would make him a higher bid than Clarke. I think it's silly to suppose Bill's plans have been wrecked . . . until we know how much Clark learned before this wiretapper's death."

Duffield asked: "How do we know there haven't been others who've had a chance to listen in on those wire-tapped conversations?"

Florence said: "Mister Vine has them for safekeeping."

"They're in the safe in my office," I said. "It'll be up to the police to say where they go eventually."

Duffield sniffed: "I don't suppose you've played them back, just to hear what's on them, Mister Vine?"

Florence cried: "Don't be disagreeable, Rick. Mister Vine didn't take any of the play-back *machines* to his office." She put it up to me. "*Did* you?"

I said, "No." I was fed up with Duffield's attitude; I couldn't understand why he was so set on riling me. "I'm not interested in your merger propositions. I can lose enough money at Hialeah and Tropical Park without getting mixed up in the stock market. My concern is to save you from smelly publicity which, in my opinion, you'll all get if you try to plane out of here tonight before the police say it's okay."

Florence choked on her drink. "You mean *we're* suspected of having something to *do* with the man's *death?*"

I didn't feel like giving an answer to that one.

Nita stood up quickly. "Here's Bill, now."

Steventz plodded through the soft sand like a man climbing a steep hill with a sack on his back.

Duffield stepped forward smartly, held out his hand: "Hi, skipper."

"Glad to see you back, Rick." Steventz was glistening with sweat.

"Don't know whether I'm glad to be back or not," Duffield said. "Tell better after you've briefed me on this snafu."

Steventz mopped his face with a square of Irish linen. "You know how we stand, Rick. If we can keep Clarke from knowing how many proxies we

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have on Soleil shares until market opening Monday morning, we'll have him over a barrel. Trevagno may have gummed the works already. Other hand, he may not have told Clarke all he picked up. Only chance of estimating how much damage may have been done is from this crook who pretends to be Trevagno. So I'm going to see him, tonight. But I want a witness when I start dickering. That's where Mister Vine comes in."

Duffield said: "Don't you think it would be better if you let me handle it, skipper? You're pretty well known; your being in a place like the *Assembly* might touch off some talk."

"Hell with talk," Steventz growled. "I'm going. And I want Mister Vine to be there . . ." he turned to me . . . "if you will, sir."

"Why?"

"Simple. I think some employee of the *Palms Plaza* was in this with that slimy snake from Washington. Likely the fellow who nearly scared Flo out of her shorts half an hour ago is working for the hotel right now. You'd be able to identify him, Mister Vine."

"What gave you the idea Trevagno had a confederate?" I asked.

"That cop said he'd talked to Trevagno's Washington office," Steventz answered. "Said they suggested he'd been getting some assistance from someone on the hotel staff."

I couldn't deny that. "Suppose I could identify this man. What would you expect me to do about it?"

"Do?" Steventz's face got red. "Put a collar on him! Jug him! Keep him locked up so he can't pass any more information along to Charner Clarke."

Duffield said: "Suppose it's one of Clarke's traps, Bill. You know he's been rumored to have used violence before."

"Sure."

Duffield added: "Suppose you ran into one of those things?"

Steventz chuckled. "I can take care of myself. How about it, Mister Vine?"

I said, "I'll be there at the *Assembly* at nine on one condition. It'll be understood that I'm there to protect the interests of Mister Waugh's employees. We don't like to have anyone on our staff under suspicion of anything like wire-tapping or blackmailing, Mister Steventz. But if a *Palms Plaza* man is in it, I'll promise you I'll jug him."

He thought about it. He didn't like it much but he couldn't very well say so. He shook hands. "See you, then."

It wasn't hard to refuse the second offer of a drink, then; when I left, Duffield and Steventz were getting set to go over a bunch of papers the Right Hand Man had brought from New York and Florence had taken Nita into the rear of the cabana for a powder-room pow-wow.

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Coming across the lania to the lobby, Eddie caught sight of me, gave me the wig-wag. He pointed to his forehead, then began to make swift circles in the air with his forefinger. I was wanted by the head man. In a hurry.

But Connie stopped me before I got to the Gee Em's office:

"Little gift of roses," he handed me a tiny packet wrapped in facial tissue. "From Ida with love."

"Valentine's Day is quite a way off, Connie." Ida was one of the two floor maids on the El Greco floor. "I'll have to get one with lace on it for her."

In the packet, after I pulled off six layers of tissue, was a hunk of lead wrapped in a folded sheet of *Palms Plaza* notepaper. The lead was a .38 bullet, its nose mashed in, all lopsided.

On the notepaper was written:

Dear Mr. V.

We did not clean up El G like you told us not to but I went in to see if there was any spair note paper we are short on it. I found this on the carpet under the writing table. So I am turning it over respecfully

Ida

CHAPTER TEN

It's a stupid sleuth who lets his emotions color his judgment. And an inhuman one who can keep from having it happen once in a while. I didn't want to believe Santos had shot Trevagno but there wasn't any doubt the evidence against him was tumble-weeding at a terrific rate.

The bawling-out the kid admitted getting from Trevagno. The accusation the wire-tapper had made to me about the four-bit theft. Trevagno's curt command to keep Santos away from his suite. The boy's subsequent trip up to El Greco and his entrance gained *via* pass key. Nita's tale of the shot while Santos had been in the suite. His hasty departure. The missing diamond. Santos's running out on us. His leaving his lodgings. Florence Steventz's reference to the voice on the phone. All of it added up to a certified cinch for any prosecutor who wasn't asleep on his feet.

Question was, did the ricocheted bullet add to that gathering evidence?

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That hunk of mashed-up metal was proof there'd been two shots, — not necessarily both from Trevagno's gun but possibly so. One had killed Trevagno; it might have been the one Nita had heard fired while Santos was in the suite. Who had fired the other . . . and who the target might have been . . . those were the thirty-eight calibre questions.

Suppose it had been Anita! It was silly to suppose I could've fallen for the girl after having talked to her a total of fifteen or twenty minutes. But neither was there any sense kidding myself: I didn't *want* to believe she'd been in that suite with the electronic-eavesdropper.

While I was glooming over the unpleasant alternatives — Santos or Nita, Nita or Santos, — Matt bulled into my office with the expression of a wildcat oil driller announcing his first gusher:

"I got it, Gil!"

"Which one of those waiters nipped off with the bubbly?" I was fairly certain he hadn't raised a head of steam over the stolen wine.

"Still checkin' on that." He seemed annoyed. "Them banquet waiters don't come on until five. What I got's bigger'n the Lorillard thing." He gave it time to sink in before he put over the punch line. "I got the inside pitch on what Trevagno was up to!"

"Where'd you get it?"

"Muriel, runs the Salon Svelte. She's one of my real pals. Muriel's been doin' Missus Steventz's hair up in their suite an' over to the Basin on their yacht, too."

"The *Fancy Free*." It was a shade smaller than the Furness cruiseships. "What's Muriel's lowdown?"

"Missus Steventz's maid, Celeste, her name is, says it's common gossip this Bass girl's on fire for her boss an' that Missus Steventz is wise." He waited like a ham actor for applause.

"Brouhaha under the hair dryer," I said. "Five will get you eight you can hear that sort of stuff about every other couple under our eighteen carat roof." But the shrill voice on that tape . . . *I'D DO ANYTHING IN THE WORLD . . . to keep him* echoed in my mind.

"Idea is Florence Steventz hired Trevagno to get the goods on her husband, hah?"

"What else?" He acted as if the conclusion was self evident. "You want me to ask around? Th' floor maids, Room Service . . . ?"

"No." I explained why that might start more gossip which could finally be whopped up to a sensation by some columnist whose television rating was sagging. "Far's we can tell now, everything's under control. Whatever Trevagno'd been doing, it's all done with. Let the dead past bury its scandals. It's not our business to dig up dirt."

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He wanted to argue but the phone rang and when I heard Parry's voice I waved Matt out of the office.

"Like you to drop around to the station, Mister Vine. So we can get your deposition, wind this thing up."

"Sure, Lieutenant. You make that paraffin test?"

"Having it made." He wasn't one to go overboard on making a statement. "Our medical examiner says there's not much doubt the man fired the shot himself so I guess we can put it in the file as suicide."

"Fair enough." I fingered the bullet in my pocket. "I brought those tapes down here to my office, locked 'em in the safe."

"Good. Did you get hold of that bellhop?" He was casual.

"Not yet, Lieutenant."

"We need his deposition, too, you know," Parry persisted.

"Have him there soon's possible."

"Hm." He wasn't satisfied. "Ten past two, now. If he doesn't show up by five, we'll have to broadcast a pickup for him. I want to wrap this up."

"So do we. I'll look into it personally, Lieutenant. You'll hear from me by five." It didn't enter my mind that I might be going out on a long and brittle limb. "Did that Dossier outfit say anything about sending someone down to identify the body?"

"Lady said likely they'd get in touch with me later on this afternoon but she hasn't called back. Remains will be over at Bailey's Funeral Home. There was money enough in his wallet to take care of the mortician, but I guess I'm not telling you anything you didn't know." He chuckled dryly. "Don't forget to let me know about that bellhop."

I headed for Gee Gee Waugh's office and for once I wasn't worrying about what our General Manager might say.

"The Police Department's been trying to locate you, Gil," he said as soon as I entered. He kept his voice down, but I knew the lion would roar presently.

"Just talked to Lieutenant Parry," I said. "You know about Trevagno?"

"I don't know how in God's good name we could have a crummy wiretapper working in the house for a week without the Security staff learning about it!"

"He came in under excellent auspices," I said. "Top man at the Higgs bank in Washington made the reservation."

"Goddamn it, who cares about the reservation! Couldn't you spot the man as a crook when he checked in?" He glowered.

"We've had him on the Watch List ever since he arrived, Gee Gee. But until this morning we had no reason to suppose he was a Listening Tom; he kept all his apparatus locked in a closet. The maids never caught a glimpse

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of it, neither did his Room Service waiter. This morning the bellman assigned to that floor happened to knock when Trevagno was listening to a playback, using a headset; he didn't hear Santos Aliga. The boy saw the apparatus and reported it to me immediately. I can't see that anyone on the staff is to blame."

"*You can't, eh!*" The lion growled. "Half an hour after this Santos tips you off, the wire-tapper's found dead!"

I nodded. "Murdered."

He came right up out of his chair. "*The hell you say!*"

"I didn't say it to the police. But between us, it was murder."

He flopped back into the chair. "You know better than to stir up a cesspool."

"I'm not," I said. "But there's a chance the police may smell something bad and do their own stirring up. The bellman who tipped me off took French leave. The cops want him to make a statement; he was the last person to see Trevagno alive, as far as we know. But the kid's left his rooming house; I've had one of Connie's boys over in West Palm looking for him. I've just sent a busboy friend of his over there to hunt for him. If they don't get hold of him by five o'clock; the police are going to put out a pickup alarm for him. Then the fat'll start to spatter."

He looked as if apoplexy was setting in. "You think Santos shot the fellow?"

"No. Trevagno had been hired to spy on Bill Steventz . . . in the Zuloaga suite next El Greco. He'd wangled the El Greco out of the desk after having been assigned to Rivera, first. Dead man was a rat at heart; he'd been in touch with Steventz offering to sell out his employer. Steventz says he hadn't made a deal but was considering it. Natural thing would be to suspect the man who'd hired Trevagno in the first place, the man who was being given the criss-cross treatment."

"And who," Gee Gee asked, "was he?"

"Friend of yours," I told him. "Charner Clarke."

He fooled me. He didn't roar at all. Just glared at me for a long half-minute, then said quietly:

"You find Santos and find him before those cops do and get him to make a sensible statement to the effect it must have been suicide. And you keep this mess out of the papers. Hear?"

"It's a large order," I said, "but it's what you're paying me for."

"I won't be paying you if you miss on this! And keep away from Charner, understand? Get him mixed up in this, I'll crucify you!"

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

FINDING SANTOS was my first chore, however. Just to make sure, I asked our Transportation Desk to check the airlines, to see if a Señor Aliga had taken any outbound passage to Nassau or elsewhere. Then I remembered about the fishing camp, and shelved the information in the back of my mind.

The Transportation Desk had just called back to say no dice on any outgoing plane passenger by the name of Aliga, when Herrick Duffield marched into my office, cradling a pigskin attaché case in one arm.

"Am I correct," he inquired coldly, "that an establishment such as yours is supposed to protect the personal property of its guests?"

"Within reason," I hedged. "If the property is in the form of jewelry we provide safe deposit vaults which may be arranged for at the cashier's office."

He set the attaché case on my desk as carefully as if it contained a relic of the True Cross. "You certainly don't expect guests to leave personal baggage in a safe deposit vault!"

"That would depend on what's in it. Have you any reason to believe your luggage has been tampered with?"

"I can't be sure, that's the hell of it." He pointed to an oblong sticker pasted across both lid and body of the case: *Samples. Property of VOLTAMAG LIMITED, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.* "Mister Steventz thinks this case has been opened. It was in one of the closets for which, we were assured, no employees of the *Palms Plaza* has a key."

"What's in it?" It seemed pretty clear why Trevagno had gone to the trouble of removing the tumbler from the lock of his own suite, copying the maker's master serial number off the outer barrel and having some lockmaker turn out a master which would open any other lock in the house.

"Samples of ore," he said. "Not ordinary samples. Confidentially, these are evidence, we've gone to considerable expense to get them, to be used in establishing that there has been gross fraudulence and concealment of assets on the part of the present management of one of the companies Mister Steventz means to rehabilitate."

"You think Trevagno got in your suite, in the closet and in that case to switch samples on you?"

"Exactly. We can't tell for another few days. Then we'll have our own

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mineralogist test them." Duffield turned up the rheostat in those cat-eyes. "I tell you frankly, Mister Vine; if there's been any substitution of worthless ore for the high grade samples Mister Steventz had in here, we're bound to hold your hotel responsible."

"You'd have to prove the substitution was done in your suite, which is going to be difficult." I couldn't let him think he might get away with that.

Duffield's whiskers twitched. "It's so valuable we didn't even want to let anyone know we had it. On these samples may depend the control of a hundred million dollar combine! If they are the specimens we obtained at such cost and so much trouble, they will demonstrate beyond a doubt that Charner Clarke has been guilty of a criminal milking of his corporation's reserves!"

"You're out of my league with all that high finance pitch," I said. "I'm a Class C, or penny ante, player, myself. But I can't admit any negligence. Trevagno couldn't just walk into your suite and hocus-pocus his way into that closet. You've nothing to show he did. We're anxious to please; we'll do what's humanly possible to protect your property but —"

"Very well." He was curt; he wanted me to think he was hurt by my uncooperative attitude. "We'll let the culpability go. But I wish you'd lock this case in your own safe now, rather than having it put in the regular hotel deposit vault. We'd feel safer about it."

"Sure." I hefted it; it must've weighed twenty-five pounds.

He waved airily. "Just be sure this case isn't turned over to anyone but me or Mister Steventz." He marched out briskly.

I had the case in my hand, about to twirl the combination on Charlie Soames' safe when the phone jingled and I set the case down on a pile of Daily Protection Reports.

It was Nita. "Gil . . . ?"

"Right."

"I'm at the pool. Can you hop over for a second?"

"Be right over." But when I hung up I was in no hurry to rush away. Three or four of the Reports on the top of the pile had curled themselves right up on the side of that attaché case and had stuck there as if glued.

It was the paper clips. They clung to the side of the case so I had to really pull 'em off. Whatever was in that case had a magnetic pull strong enough to hold my stainless steel knife against the side as if it had been nailed on; I tried it.

What I don't know about magnetic ores includes it all. But I did some silent questioning of Duffield's motives before I rang Tomaso, our gorilla-built day-side porter.

"Sometheeng, Meester Vine?"

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I gave him a locker key with a numbered tag on it. "This is for 326, Male Employees. Lock this case in there and bring back the key, Tomaso."

He, too, was surprised at the weight of the attaché case. "W'at's inside, eh? Gold breeks, eh?"

While he was gone I put it up to Transportation to find out if a plane had touched down at the Brunswick Airport for an emergency landing that morning and when and who was on it and could anyone there identify Herrick Duffield as having been there around eleven o'clock. I can't say I was suspicious about it; he didn't strike me as the sort to set up an alibi that couldn't be checked.

When Tomaso came back with the locker key, I strolled out to the Poinsettia pool, a little thing a hundred feet wide by a hundred yards long. At the end where the diving tower was outlined in white against the red tiles of the shower shed, Florence Steventz was doing a languid and graceful half-gainer. She jiggled on the high board long enough to attract the attention of all the poolsiders, then floated off like a white ibis plunging for a fish.

Nita was at one of the glass-topped tables; she wasn't watching the swan-divers or the back-somersaulters. I thought she was watching for me. Anyhow she caught sight of me at the same time I saw her; she seemed to be glad to see me.

"Flo may come over any minute," she held out her hand. "I want to say something before she does, Gil . . . Would you do something for me if I told you it would please me *very* much?"

"All right." She took back the hand I'd been holding onto. "I'd just *love* you if you could find some way to break up that appointment Bill has with this faker who pretends to be Trevagno."

"Why?"

"Because you'll . . ." she avoided my eyes ". . . you'll be saving someone's life. Does that sound melodramatic? I guess it does. But it's absolutely true. I happen to know — *know* — that this information Trevagno wanted Bill to buy from him didn't have anything in the world to do with mergers or proxies. And I'm almost certain that's the same information this faker wants to peddle, too."

"Rational conclusion."

"You see, Gil . . . . there's a . . . well, a family scandal . . . smoldering, I guess you could say."

I said, "*Oh*, oh."

"If it breaks out in the open, somebody'll get hurt. I mean *killed*. But it's all over . . ." she glanced at me swiftly ". . . the scandal is, I mean. All over, for good. So if it's kept quiet, everything will work out all right. If it isn't . . ." she waved and yoo-hooed at Florence, sauntering over.

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"Any suggestions," I asked, *sotto voce*, "as to how I'm to break up this interview tonight?"

Nita shook her head, murmured: "I wouldn't have the slightest idea. But I'll trust you to do it, one way or another."

Then Florence was with us.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Don't you think it's *ridiculous* for Bill to meet that phoney at the *Assembly Club*, Mister Vine?" she said.

"Can't say." I had to duck that one. "Depends on what your husband thinks he can learn."

"Oh, that's absurd. All this partner of Trevagno's — he *must* have been the dead man's partner or he wouldn't have known about that letter — all he could possibly tell Bill is what was picked up on those damned bugs tapped in on our suite. Bill knows all that *anyhow*."

Nita said: "You won't talk Bill out of going."

Florence raised her eyes, stared at the secretary. "I know Bill *quite* as well as you do, darling." She let it sink in before she added: "He's sore because he didn't find out about the wire-tap before he had Charner over for breakfast this morning; Bill feels like a fool because he thinks now that Charner must have been laughing at him, knowing exactly — from those keyhole listening gimmicks — what Bill and Rick had planned. When Bill thinks he's made a fool of himself, he's dangerous."

"You had Clarke over to the hotel for breakfast?"

"Oh, no. On the *Fancy Free*." Florence semaphored to a waiter four tables away. "We went down the Bay and back while Bill and Charner lied to each other about their magnesium corporations. Charner's big plant's up near Niagara Falls; Bill's just taken on the new sea-water extraction operation in South Carolina. Both of them were thinking about what a merger might mean but neither of them mentioned it."

"That's the way Bill always does the spadework," Nita put in. "Of course if Mister Clarke had known what Bill and Rick meant to do, — that two hour discussion would have been a waste of time. Worse than wasted; it would have put us at a disadvantage in dealing with Clarke."

I thought Bill Steventz's wife gave his secretary a dirty look but Nita didn't appear to be disturbed. I asked whether the breakfast party had stopped by the hotel after the yacht had docked.

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Florence held up her emerald wedding ring to admire it in the hot sunlight. "We wanted Charner to drop in at the cabana but he was anxious to get back to *Grovewater*, his place on the lakeside. Bill's sure the crafty old coyote just wanted to get where he could phone his brokers to get ready for a fight."

Nita ignored the ostentatious display of the ring. "I hope there won't be any fight." She flicked a glance at me.

"And there will be a fight. Unless you can do something with him, Mister Vine. You *are* going to the *Assembly* with him, *aren't* you? You're not going to let us down?"

I said: "I'll be there" and let it go at that.

Nita was reluctant for me to leave but I thought the blonde wasn't too eager to have me stay. I gave them the sundial excuse about its having been later than I thought . . . and drifted away.

Nita could hardly have put it more plainly. The byplay between the two girls at the poolside needed no spelling out. If Trevagno'd managed to catch any bedroom badinage on his electronic recorders, there couldn't have been a stronger motive for murder . . . if he'd tried to use the tape for a spot of blackmail.

As I crossed the lobby a headline bombed me from the newsstand: a three column wide Page One-er in the Miami Evening Dispatch:

MYSTERY MAN ON
SENATE WIRETRAP QUIZ
BELIEVED HIDING HERE

I bought a paper. The story was about Trevagno, all right. There was no photograph but the description was detailed. Even to his peculiar hoarse barking. The only balm in Gilead was that the wizard wire-tapper was believed to be in Miami Beach instead of on a slab at the local mortuary.

By the time I'd gotten to the part about Trevagno's legendary ability to amplify a fly's footsteps so as to sound like an elephant tapdancing on a tin roof, I'd crossed the lobby, entered my office.

A bland voice cut into my reading-reverie: "If you go around with your head down all the time, young man, you'll miss a lot of opportunities."

Charner Clarke! Lounging languidly on a corner of my desk. Appraising me with a critical and caustic eye —

He was handsome in a frosty fashion; the sort of thin aristocratic face, — shaggy white eyebrows, white goatee and deep-socketed eyes — that casting directors try to find when they need an actor to play an ambassador or a distinguished connoisseur of the fine arts. His clothes looked as if he'd been

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made up for a Gay Nineties masquerade;—it must have been a fine tailor who could make a suit look that out-dated.

I didn't want him to know he'd thrown me off my stride: "I keep out of a lot of trouble by sticking my nose in a newspaper instead of other people's business, Mister Clarke." And smiled to show no offense meant.

He chuckled. "Hope you haven't been sticking to that rule regularly. Or you've been wasting my money."

"How so?" I put the newspaper on the desk, headline down.

"I've been paying you to stick your nose into Steventz's business."

"Either somebody's been kidding you," I let him see I was taking a burn, "or you're trying to kid *me*. I've never seen a dime of your dough. I don't want to. And if I ever took money to pry into the personal affairs of a guest, it'd be the kind of money you wouldn't be willing to pay."

He let the eyebrows express astonishment. "I was given to understand you were working with a man named Trevar; I paid Trevar by check for your services; I have the vouchers."

"Then you're a damned fool. To trust a professional tattle-tale further than you could throw a match against the wind. To fall for his sucker-style expense accounts. To believe a man who's played on Gee Gee Waugh's team for ten years would sell out his side because he was offered a few lousy bucks." I couldn't see any sense in pulling my punches.

He didn't like it, but he didn't lose his temper. "At least you'll concede I was paying Trevar . . . ?"

"Trevagno. Merle Trevagno. Of Dossier Research Associates. I won't dispute you if you insist on making an admission like that. Trevagno's dead; you know that or you wouldn't be here."

"He had some of my property in his possession. I paid for certain records which he guaranteed to turn over to me. I'll take them now, Mister Vine."

"You're barking up the wrong sycamore, Mister Clarke. You better take that up with the Palm Beach Police." I sat down at my desk.

"You have the tapes here in the hotel," he said flatly.

"You're mistaken if you think you can get them from me. They're out of my hands entirely." I wondered what the hell would happen if Gee Gee should stroll past my open office door. *Leave Charner Clarke alone!* He hadn't left *me* alone!

"Better hand them over." He stuck to the kindly advisor role. "I'll get them sooner or later; better save yourself some grief."

"If it comes to that," I wanted to goad him out of the office, "there's likely to be plenty of grief for someone when the police learn Trevagno was trying to sell you out. They might even think a double-cross might be a motive for murder."

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"You say Trevagno was a traitor?" He dropped the languid pose.

"Hell, he'd been a traitor for years! Who else but a born betrayer would turn to keyhole-listening to make a living? What I said was, the bastard offered to sell the dope you paid for, to Steventz."

"When was this?" It rocked him back on his heels.

"You'll have to ask Steventz. But if you decide not to let that sleeping dog lie in his long sleep, the police will be pretty apt to ask you if you were in the vicinity of the *Palms Plaza* this morning around the time Trevagno died."

He smiled thinly; his eyes slitted. "As I just told you a moment ago, if I ever reached the conclusion that it was necessary to have a dirty job done, —such as putting an obnoxious creature out of the way — I should hire someone to do it for me. I might pick someone like you, Mister Vine. You have access to any suite in the hotel; you could easily cover up any traces which might incriminate you. It shouldn't be difficult, in this town, to have my word stand up against yours."

I grabbed the phone. "Get through to the police, honey. I want Lieutenant Parry on the line." I put my palm over the mouthpiece. "You seem pretty sure there aren't many people in this town who'd call your bluff. But I'm calling it. You tell the Lieutenant what you just said to me."

He smiled sardonically.

Parry came on. "Hi, Lieutenant," I said. "I have Mister Charner Clarke here in my office. He wants a word or two with you." I handed over the phone.

Clarke said: "Sad business about this death in the hotel, Pete . . . Yes, yes, I understand your position . . . no, no fault to find . . . but I'm anxious to recover my property . . . exactly, exactly . . . they've been bought and paid for . . . true, true, but I don't want to stir up a hornet's nest of newspapermen by getting a court order . . . you see what I'm getting at? . . . Well, well, I'll have Judge Cory call you about the order . . . Right, right . . . by the way, where are the recordings now? . . . Oh! . . . is that so? . . . been a nest of scorpions I'd have been thoroughly stung, wouldn't I? . . . thanks, Pete . . . I'll have the Judge straighten it out with you." He hung up, resuming the languid movements.

I told myself off for thinking Parry could have bucked a local power as strong as the last of the Old Guard.

"Mister Vine, those tapes are right there in that safe."

"And there they stay," I answered.

"We'll see what your employer has to say about that, young man!" He loped out of the office, repeating: "We'll see about that!"

It took him about a minute to get to Gee Gee's inner sanctum. And not

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much more than half of that for me to spin that safe dial, whisk those cases of tapes out and head for the basement.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I TOOK THE camera cases to that assistant wine steward Matt had been raking over the coals. "Stow these away somewhere, Jules," I requested, "and keep 'em stowed until I ask for 'em."

"*Certainement*, M'sieu Vine. *Mais*, there is some misunderstanding about the matter of Madame Lorrilard's champagne. One does not like to have his reputation —"

"Forget it," I cut him short. "Pay no attention to Matt Gregory. He doesn't mean anything by that hammer and tongs technique. We know you wouldn't steal so much as a used corkpuller. But take good care of those cases. And don't stay them near any fuse boxes or electric motors, *savez?*"

He said he understood well.

I hustled out to the hotel's parking lot, found one of the green-and-gilt station wagons on the line with the key in the switch. In sixty seconds I was waving to the guard at the ornamental iron gates, rolling down Ocean Boulevard.

It was a different perspective, — the billiard-table green of the golf course as I swung across Royal Poinciana, the red tile roofs on the clubhouse, the theatrical blue of Lake Worth as I hit the Flagler Bridge — but it didn't make the situation back at the *Palms* look any better. My tail was in a crack and if Charner Clarke didn't swing the door to pinch it, Parry would.

From the Lieutenant's viewpoint I'd be running out on him, as Santos had run out on me. But there wasn't any sense trying to tell him where I was going, when I had no notion, myself.

What Clarke would do when he found out I'd removed those tape recordings from the safe — that really gave one furiously to pause, as Jules would have said.

Trevagno had claimed I was helping with the wire-tap. The cautious babe at Dossier had confirmed it — to Parry. Now Clarke was in the act with that remark about vouchers showing I'd been paid for services rendered. Add to that the fact that I'd discovered the body, that I might have typed out that farewell note before Parry got to the hotel — it could be enough for some ambitious cracker prosecutor to make a Roman holiday, with G. Vine being tossed to the lions.

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The only thing I could do would be to find Santos. So I decided to give the fish camp a try. While driving, I thought the whole thing over.

First point was Herrick Duffield. Why had he tried to put over a fast one by asking me to lock up that attaché case in the same safe with the tape recordings? He must have thought that the sound tracks on the tape would have been blurred out or at least damaged by close contact with a magnet — or a bunch of them. I'm no electronician but I knew that much.

Only conclusion was, Duffield knew what was on the tapes — had decided it'd be dangerous to have the police hear the recordings. If it had been merely business conversations, that wouldn't have agitated the police any. Scandal was indicated.

Second point was Nita Bass. How had she guessed that Trevagno's bald-faced sell-out offer to Steventz had to do with the scandal that was "all over now" rather than corporation secrets? In any case, why hadn't she told me about it at our *tête-à-tête* in the Lounge? Or would she have, if Duffield hadn't broken it up? And why was she afraid of Duffield? She was, I was sure of it.

The clock said quarter to five when I bounced down a road made of oyster shells and broken whisky bottles to a long galvanized iron shed bearing huge yellow letters:

SANS SOUCI FISHING CAMP
Boats — Bait — Tackle — Gas — Supplies — Ice — Beer
McDONNELL, *prop.*

A long pier jutting out into the lagoon. A dozen rowboats. A small shrimper. A party boat with *Dollar Per Hour Per Person* on its pilot house. Two trucks and three cars parked by a row of cabbage palms.

One of the cars was a beat-up Chevvy.

There wasn't anyone in sight except a man in khaki trunks sanding the topsides of the party boat. I pulled up alongside the Chevvy.

It was exactly five o'clock when I jiggled open the lock of the glove compartment with the help of a tension-tool.

The license was in there. It was made out to *Aliga, Santos.*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE RADIATOR of the Chevvy was cool but I went around, felt the exhaust pipe to be sure. The car hadn't been running for a couple of hours at least.

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In the back seat was a soap-flake carton tied with old clothesline, but no suitcase. I monkeyed with the lock on the trunk compartment; it was tougher than the glove-lock.

When I got the luggage compartment open, there was one suitcase in it. But no carton. Eddie'd said the Haggarty woman had told him Santos had two.

To guarantee no sudden getaway, I lifted the Chevvy's hood, disconnected one of the battery cables. Twice, while I was at that, the sensation of unseen eyes fixed on me was so strong I did a quick pivot to search the underbrush, the pier, what was visible of the shed.

The side of the shed nearest the pier was evidently the boat rental office. Sauntering toward it I reminded myself that Santos would be amongst friends. If he'd let them in on the fact he was hiding out, they wouldn't be likely to give me much information.

There didn't seem to be a soul in the shed.

Along the lagoon-side of the shed ran a broad plank wharf with finger slips projecting out from it. Three freshly painted boats were tied up in the slips, — two flat-bottomed skiffs and a bright red outboard speedboat.

Further down, by the last slip, which was empty, another soap-flake carton stood by a water spigot. The carton had been untied but the rope which had bound it was still on the wharf. An old length of clothesline. I drifted down toward it.

A head popped up above that last slip. A massive head with a broad, flat face pitted and scarred, with tousled hair like freshly cut rope ends. Gray eyes gazed at me with no friendliness, a gruff Irish voice inquired: "Well and what the hell might you be lookin' for?"

I answered in kind. "What in the hell *would* I be looking for in a fishing camp? Bananas? Your name McDonnell?"

"That's me." The shoulders emerged, giant shoulders. "You want a boat?"

"What else?" I dismissed the idea of coming right out and inquiring about Santos.

"From the looks of you I thought you might be wantin' a pair of blue jeans an' a cap. You goin' out in that rig?"

He had me there. My summerweight dacron, the Ecuadorian panama, the Bond Street bluchers, weren't quite *au fait* for a session with the snook and mullet. "I don't see any dames around. Who's objecting to my stripping to shorts? Or are you looking for an excuse not to rent me a boat?"

He spat a quid of tobacco twenty feet. "Rent you any damn thing you can pay for. You got your rod?"

"Nothing but the ambition," I said. "Not many fishermen here this weekend."

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"You're early. There'll be a gang here, couple hours."

Twenty minutes later I was jerking the cord of a five horse outboard in my undershirt and shorts.

McDonnell paid no attention to me after he'd found I knew how to step in a boat without tipping myself overboard. He was back at the float, working on the canvas, when I stopped the motor ten feet off the party boat.

The man with the sander looked down at me. "You got her choked too much, bud."

"Expect you're right." I jerked the starter cord again with no result. "Don't know too much about these gadgets. Thought a friend of mine would be here to give me a hand. But I guess Santos went out on his own."

"Kid who's a bellhop? Yup?" He started the sander again so I had trouble making out his words. "Think he took the *Cachalot* down toward the South Inlet. But he'll be back by dark; he ain't got runnin' lights on her yet."

"Then I'll see him. Thanks." I yanked on the cord; I didn't look back to see whether McDonnell had done his turtle-head act again or not.

The skiff coasted south at ten per. After fifteen minutes I cut the motor, tossed out the five pound grapnel and waited. I was pretty sure I could see Santos before he got wind of me; that *Cachalot* sounded like more than a flat-bottomed boat. Probably one of those tabloid outboard cruisers.

The trick would be to get close to him before he got away from me. If he got back to *Sans Souci* before I did, McDonnell'd be likely to tell him about the sap who came fishing in his Saturday-night-shindig clothes. Then he might run for it. With Parry's pickup order out, Santos would probably be run right into the hoosegow . . . and over would go the applecart.

I'd waited about forty mosquito bites, — watching the pelicans zoom down a little way off my skiff, hit the water with a clumsy splash and come up munching fresh mullet, — when I noticed a bank of thunderheads, piling up in the southwest. Out there in shallow water a mile from shore was no place to be in a squall. I upped anchor, got the five horses harnessed and began to ride the whitecaps back toward Lantana. My plan was to get nearer to base and anchor again so I wouldn't have so far to go after Santos showed up.

I'd been so busy getting that grapnel aboard that I never noticed one big whitecap which came up the waterway at a good fifteen mile clip. It was almost abeam before I recognized it for a junior-grade cruiser with one of those silent outboards.

It was a quarter-mile east of me so I couldn't identify the person in the cockpit. By the same token he couldn't have recognized me. But it looked like a new boat.

He was making three miles to my two; I figured he'd get in five minutes

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before I did. He would have except that the squall hit when we were a mile out and I was nearer the west bank where the water was calmer. I came into the channel at the *Sans Souci* dock a hundred yards ahead of him.

I slowed. He came alongside. I couldn't see the name on his boat but it was Santos mopping rain and spray off his face. I cut over. He swung his bow away sharply, startled. He cut his speed to avoid a crash. I grabbed the cockpit gunwale, held on.

I think he'd have gunned his motor, turned around and tried to shake me loose if I hadn't called out:

"Easy, boy. I'm on your team. Want to save you some trouble, not get you into any."

He said something in Spanish that I couldn't understand, then . . . "*I didn't do it, Mister Vine!*"

"Know you didn't." I had to shout, the wind was so strong. "I wouldn't have come after you if I'd thought you had."

We came into that end slip side by side. McDonnell was there on the wharf with blood in his eye and a tarpon gaff in his fist. *He* was on Santos's side, too, apparently.

"Come on ashore, Santy," he waved the steel barb, "I'll see to it nobody tags after you."

Santos got his stern line around a piling. "No need of the strongarm stuff, Big Mac. This is a friend of mine. Duke up with Mister Vine . . . Mister McDonnell."

An odd introduction, that. Me with my underwear plastered to my frame, Big Mac with the gaff still at the ready. But he took Santos's sayso. In five minutes we were tied up and I was in the tiny cabin of the *Cachalot*.

Santos had cigarettes and rum; we used both.

"There's a police order out to pick you up," I said between rums.

"I should have gone to Nassau," he said.

"That would have been the worst thing you could have done. What you did was nearly as bad." I used one of his towels; he was all set for living aboard . . . bunks, stove, refrigerator. "Why didn't you come straight to me after leaving that crumb's suite?"

He took a slug himself. "You wouldn't have believed me. I wouldn't have expected you to."

"Why shouldn't I? You had no reason to murder the bastard."

He looked into the bottom of the cup from which he'd been drinking. "There wasn't any murder. He . . . he just shot himself, Mister Vine. While I was right there watching, he shot himself. Who'd ever believe that?"

"Why, I would," I said. But I didn't.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

He was lying; I was morally certain. But it was important to know why. "Tell me how it happened." I borrowed one of his dry cigarettes.

His round face was pinched with strain but, tension or no, he was a good-looking kid squatting on the edge of that bunk under the low cabin-ceiling. "I knocked but there wasn't any answer so after a bit I used my key.

"He was crouched on the edge of that divan. He had a gun in his hand. The second he saw me he cried out — he didn't actually say anything I could understand. It was more as if he thought I was someone who'd come to arrest him. Then he raised the gun; I thought he meant to shoot me so I jumped to get behind the table. I went down on my hands and knees. When the shot came I flattened myself on the carpet. I think I yelled at him but I'm not sure; maybe I wanted to yell so much I thought I did. There wasn't any second shot, though. When I peeked under the table, he was lying on his back with the smoke coming out of the muzzle of the pistol just like that smoke from your cigarette."

It was perfectly plausible. But I had some reservations. I kept them to myself. "Then what'd you do?"

"I swear to God I don't remember exactly, Mister Vine. I think I got up and set the parcel post package on the table. Next thing I knew, I was out in the corridor, running like crazy and thinking that no matter what, everybody'd believe I shot him."

"Didn't see anybody? In the suite? Out in the hall?"

"No sir." If he was protecting somebody, he was doing a good job of it.

"Say anything to anyone at the hotel about what had happened?"

"No. I didn't even sign in on the ledger. I just walked out to the Lanai and around by the Hibiscus drive to the lot and got my car and went over to West Palm."

"Very understandable. Very dumb. Was Rene in the Bar?"

"I didn't see him. I don't believe I'd have spoken to him if I had."

"I sent Rene out to hunt for you." The temperature had dropped; it was getting dark and I was getting chilled through in spite of the rum. "He didn't come over here this afternoon?"

"Not far's I know. Did he tell you I'd bought a boat?"

"No. Connie just happened to mention this place. But you couldn't have holed up here for long anyway, Santos. The police are sending out pickup

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broadcasts for you; every deputy sheriff in the county will be on your trail. Somebody'd be sure to tell one of them about the *Cachalot*. Lucky I found you first."

"The cops going to arrest me for murder?" His easy-smiling mouth set in a stubborn line.

"Don't see why they should," I said. "Looks to me as if the only law you've broken is the law of averages. Chances must have been about a zillion to one that you'd have been sent up to El Greco just when the blow-off came."

"Then . . . what they want me for?"

"They want to set you down at a desk and have you type out a statement of everything you saw and heard in that suite, Santos."

"Type?" He waggled his head. "I can't type."

I was glad to hear it . . . assuming it was so. That farewell note was a baffler. "Then just dictate; they'll have an officer take it down. We better shove off before some deputy shows up."

"Mister Vine. Do they *think* it was murder?"

"Doctor who examined the body seems satisfied he fired the shot himself. You say he shot himself. He left what passes for a suicide note. Police Lieutenant's about ready to mark the case closed but he needs a statement from you and one from me. Let's go give 'em to him. It's getting dark." I went out to the cockpit. "I'm going up to the shed to get dressed. You hop along soon's you can."

He slapped both hands on his bare knees. "All right. If you say so, Mister Vine. I hate to do it. But I've never heard of your steering any of the help into a jam so I'll string along."

"Fair enough, Santy." I clambered up the wharf ladder.

I wrung out my shorts, got into them again, dressed in a damp, clammy fashion. There was a pay phone on the wall: when I had my shirt on I called the hotel, asked for Connie:

"Crysake! Where you been, Mister Vine?"

"Hunting," I said, "and fishing. Santos is with me. We're down at a fishing camp called *Sans Souci* just out of Lantana. But don't pass that along."

"Not even to the mainspring? Mister Waugh's been bellowin' like — like a —"

"I've heard him bellow, Connie. Just tell him I called in to say I've located Aliga and I'm going to the police station with him now. Okay?"

"Got it. The Transportation Desk has been tryin' to reach you, sir."

"Switch me over."

I waited a couple of minutes, then Ethel said: "D.N.A. from Transportation; sorry, Mister Vine."

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"When they Do Answer, honeychile, buzz me back here, huh?" I gave her the number.

Santos showed up, not in uniform but in slacks and a charcoal gray sports jacket over a pink shirt. He looked despondent.

Big Mac asked how they'd been biting.

"Six trout, couple grouper," the bellboy said. "They're in a pail in the cockpit. If I don't get back tonight, stick 'em on the ice for me, will you, Big Mac?"

The pay phone rang and I went for it. It was the Transportation Desk:

"We made a thorough check on that Brunswick thing, Mister Vine. A four passenger twin motor Beechcraft radioed in at ten-fifty-five this morning asking for permission to land on account of a leak in the main fuel line. Permission was granted at ten fifty-eight. Plane touched down at eleven-nine. Mechanics worked on it about twenty minutes after which it took off again. Its flight plan called for West Palm Beach as destination. The owner and pilot was Herrick Duffield, the fellow who's Steventz's right bower. Personnel at the Brunswick field know Duffield well; he's rented hangar space there several times."

"That does it." It eliminated Duffield from being among those present at the scene of the crime; I started to say how much I was obliged when I heard an outcry: it sounded some distance off but I couldn't be sure.

I slapped the receiver back on the hook. Neither Santos nor Big Mac was in the shed.

Another shout. That one came from around the other side of the shed. I ran.

As I rounded the building I could see, even though there was so little light, that the hood of the Chevvy'd been raised. There was only one other car there, aside from the station wagon. Both trucks were parked where I'd first seen them but a red taillight was careening wildly down the shell road in a spatter of mud.

My first thought was that Santos was playing dumb fool by making a second getaway. Then I heard a groan, the kind that means someone's been hurt, really hurt.

Santos was jack-knifed over the fender on the far side of the Chevvy, his head down by the battery cable I'd loosened, his knees bent as if he was about to spring.

My second snap judgment was that Big Mac had slugged the boy and taken off in that car that was disappearing down the road. One look at the back of Santos's skull was enough to show me *that* was as wrong as my first idea. The bellboy's head had been clobbered to a pulp; he couldn't have uttered a sound, he never would utter any sound again.

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The man from the party boat shouted from the pier. "Hey! What's the matter?"

I spun around. Between the station wagon and a pick-up truck was Big Mac, face down on the ground but struggling desperately to get one knee under him.

When I got to him he turned that pitted face toward me blindly — blood streamed down over his forehead and into his eyes. He couldn't see me but he mumbled:

"Nev' min' me . . . get that son bitch . . . !" and collapsed.

The party boat man pounded up, cursing as he saw Big Mac:

"*Goddlemighty — what you do to him!*"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"DON'T STAND THERE yapping at me!" I opened the rear door of the station wagon. "Give me a hand with him. Get him in the car."

He helped me roll Big Mac on his back; we lifted him. I said: "You heard me run up here from the shed after I heard the fracas."

"Heard somebody," he panted. "Might've been Big Mac. Might've been you."

"Big Mac was the one who shouted." I whipped off my coat to make a pillow so the injured man's head wouldn't bang against the seat. "Man who slugged him took off in that car." I pointed to the red eye down the road; it winked out at that moment. "You drive?"

"Sure. That's my truck." He jabbed a thumb at the nearest pickup. "But she's beat . . . she won't do better'n forty without th' transmission fallin' out. I couldn't catch that guy." He slapped the fender of the station wagon. "Whyn't you go after him in this?"

"More important to get this fellow to the hospital," I said. "Think his skull may be fractured. You know where the hospital is, in West Palm Beach?"

"Sure, it's —"

"Get in. With Big Mac." I slid behind the wheel. "You can direct me. If that other car's heading north, we might overtake him. You know who owned that third car . . . the one that was parked here with those two when I drove in?" I switched on the lights so he could see the two that were still there.

"Uh, uh." He climbed in. "Think it was a Pontiac but I'm not sure.

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Never saw it before. Didn't see who drove it, either. I don't work for the camp, see. I just run the party boat."

I found that fifty was the best I could do on that shell and sand but I held her at fifty. "When'd that Pontiac, or whatever it was, come in this afternoon?"

"Couldn't say. It wasn't here at lunch, know that. I came up to the truck for some grease right after lunch, wasn't here then. What th' hell'd he belt Mac for!"

"Mac went to help my friend. The bellhop, remember?"

"Yeah. Saw you come in with him." His voice went a pitch higher. "*Sa-a-y!* Must of been the kid on the *Cachalot* who's in that car just left! Whaddya mean Big Mac had gone to help him!"

"Santos had the Chevvy. You notice the raised hood on the Chevvy?"

"Yeah . . . ?"

"Kid was working on his battery connections. Someone sneaked up behind him, knocked his brains out."

"*No!*" he said. "Mean the kid's *dead?*"

"Stone dead in the Chevrolet. Big Mac probably heard the blow, rushed over to help Santos. He must have grappled with the killer, took that smash in the head in the struggle." I swung north on US 1; with a hard surface under her, the station wagon did a solid seventy.

Main thing now's to save Big Mac. He saw the murderer face to face; he's the only one who can identify the man."

"Guess that's right." He subsided into a suspicious silence. Then: "Why you suppose he socked the bellhop?"

"That's one for the police, friend." I'd done some thinking about that and had gotten nowhere. My personal radar system hadn't deceived me, that was plain; there had been someone watching me while I prowled around the Chevvy earlier in the afternoon. He'd been at the camp when I got there; maybe he, too, had been waiting for Santos to come back.

We caught up to the red tail-light; it was on a Jaguar driven by a girl who had a man's head on her shoulder. There was nothing else in sight except a big reefer truck.

The party boat man muttered: "Jeeze, *murder!* Maybe two murders!"

I said: "Yes. And you'd better buzz the sheriff's office soon's we get to the hospital. Or some of the camp's customers may find the kid's body and move it. Authorities don't like to have murder victims moved until they come on the scene."

"Jeeze," he repeated. "This'll get in the papers and everything."

"There's the hospital . . . just ahead," the man behind me pointed across my shoulder.

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We slewed into the Emergency Entrance. I was out and jabbing the bell before our dust had overtaken us.

"Man with a badly crushed skull," I snapped at the interne who came to the door. "He's in bad shape."

They worked efficiently, those young doctors, I'll say that. Quick examination on the floor of the back seat with flashlights. Swift stretcher evacuation. Nurses waiting with the rolling bed to wheel Big Mac into the elevator, up to the Operating Room.

The party boat man was in the booth down the corridor telling someone that he was Herbert Hamlin of Lantana and no he didn't have anything to do with the fellow's death, he'd just come to the hospital with another man who'd been injured at the same time.

A nurse advanced on me with pad and pencil. "Your friend's name?"

"I scarcely know him. But his name is McDonnell. He runs a fishing camp at *Sans Souci*. That's all I know about him but that gentleman in the phone booth may be able to give you more information."

The gentleman stuck his head out of the phone booth and asked: "Say . . . what was the bellhop's name?"

"Aliga," I told him. "Santos Aliga. He worked for the *Palms Plaza*." There was no use trying to conceal his connection with the hotel; it would be bound to come out.

The nurse said: "How was the injury sustained?"

"In a fight. Trying to defend another man. That's all I can tell you," I said. "You'll have to get the rest of it from the police."

Hamlin came out of the booth. "They want both of us to stay right here until a deputy gets here."

"That's nice. Are they sending someone out to the camp for the body?" I went into the booth.

Hamlin looked worried. "The sheriff didn't mention it. But hell, mister, I can't afford to wait here. I got six head coming at nine o'clock. I'm taking a party out to the Stream."

I told him that was tough; I had a couple of things to do myself that evening but probably the deputies wouldn't detain us too long. Then I called the police station.

It took me a few minutes to get through to Parry. The nurse asked Hamlin a batch of questions and he kept her busy scribbling on her pad. I thought about *my* nine o'clock appointment at the *Assembly Club*.

Parry said: "You're a hard man to keep up with, Mister Vine. Where are you now?"

I told him. "I brought in a man, name of McDonnell. He's up in Surgery right now, fractured skull probably. He got hurt trying to keep Santos

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from being beaten to death but he didn't succeed, Lieutenant. The boy died. Out at *Sans Souci* fish camp south of Lantana."

"Who did it?"

"Only man who can tell you that is this fellow McDonnell. He tangled with the killer. I got there too late to see him."

"You know," Parry's tone was thoughtful, "that puts you in something of a predicament, Mister Vine."

"It's a familiar feeling, Lieutenant," I said. "Every time I get in hot water up to my ears somebody begins to really pour it on. Who now? The Last of the Old Guard?"

"That's about the size of it, Mister Vine. He's given us to understand that you may have had a considerable financial interest in wanting Trevagno eliminated from the picture. You've been in the business long enough to understand that I'd be derelict if I didn't take some action about Aliga's death," he said.

"It's a county matter, Lieutenant. The Sheriff's Office is handling it."

"That's just it," he sighed. "If the Sheriff wasn't in on it, I might be able to handle . . as I see fit. With the bellhop dead and you there when it happened, I don't have any alternative."

"To what?"

"Booking you on a short affidavit," he sighed. "You stay right there. I'll be over in two shakes."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I DIDN'T ANSWER HIM. Didn't hang up, either . . . just left the receiver hanging so he might think I'd stepped away before I'd heard him out.

Hamlin grabbed my arm as I came out of the booth. "Why wouldn't it be all right if I go back to the camp? You're gonna be here anyhow when th' deputy comes an' got this six head comin' . . ."

"Better stay put, brother." I couldn't tell him flatly he was wrong about my being there when the sheriff arrived. "Just sit tight and tell the truth. I'm going to talk to the hospital super about Mac." I left Hamlin standing unhappily there in the corridor, went briskly toward a door marked *No Admittance*, through it.

It was the entrance to the kitchen. Three women were stacking dishes, clattering cutlery into racks. Through a screen door I could see a laundry yard. I kept on past the big hotel range, out.

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Parry couldn't get over from Palm Beach for another five minutes at least, I figured. So I didn't hurry, circling the Emergency Wing to the station wagon.

It was quarter past eight. If I was to do any good at the *Assembly Club* rendezvous, I'd have to get there sufficiently ahead of time to locate the spurious Trevagno before nine. Perhaps, if I managed to identify the fellow, I'd have something to offer Parry as a trade for staying out of jail.

At the station wagon, I put on the coat that I'd pillowed for Big Mac's head; the *Assembly Club* didn't admit coatless patrons . . . it had only been a few years since it had dropped the requirement of dinner jackets and black tie.

I took the South Bridge over to Royal Palm Way; Parry'd use the Flagler; he'd spot the station wagon sure. The gaudy neonery of West Palm Beach was replaced by the agreeable floodlighting of the Mizner-style Spanish buildings; I was in no mood to admire the architecture.

With Santos dead, the Trevagno case couldn't be written off as suicide. Even if I were to make an affidavit about what Santos had told me, it would only be hearsay and suspect, at that. Besides, I couldn't go for his version; it was too pat, too clearly a cover-up.

What I could find no satisfactory explanation for, was why he'd cover up a crime like murder. I couldn't believe he'd have done it for dough; I doubted if he'd been the sort to be swayed enough by sentiment to make him lie to hide a scandal.

Anyhow, the lie had caught up with him. That he'd been bludgeoned to keep him from ever telling the truth was the one thing that seemed clear. And the killer'd been willing to take a terrific risk; if Big Mac lived to tell the tale, a risk that might well end in the electric chair.

The gateman at the *Assembly's* lodge dropped his chain for the station wagon with the same deference which our *maîtres* paid to an ermine stole. Evidently some of the *Palms' bon ton* used the hotel cars on their visits to the gambling casino.

A tall Jamaican in a silver-and-lime uniform patterned after the Civil War Zouaves assigned me a parking space. I wandered up the *coquina* walk past evergreens sculptured to look like everything except trees, past a Japanese garden-pond complete with bridge and Nipponese temples. On a bench beside the arching bridge sat Nita Bass.

She wore a strapless something of pale blue; she might have been designed by the landscaper to make that particular vista perfect.

"Gil! . . . I've been waiting for you!"

"Shameless hussy." I smiled. "Do we stroll in the gardens or proceed to the roulette room?"

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"Don't make fun of me." She took my arm, pleadingly. "I'm scared witless."

"Of . . . ?"

"Bill. He's acting like a madman. He's been literally raving. No dirty doublecrosser is going to throw a monkey-wrench into his plans. He'll settle that once and for all tonight. No court in the country would convict him if he takes matters into his own hands. I've never heard him so out of control. And Gil — he has an automatic."

"Lots of men who have guns never do anything desperate with 'em, Nita." We were at the arched courtway.

"But he means to use it, I *know* he does." She slipped her hand from my arm. "Gil!" She dropped her voice to a whisper. "There's . . . blood on your sleeve!"

Oh, fine! I said to myself. Big Mac's blood! "I took a man to the hospital a few minutes ago. He'd been hurt in a fight." I didn't think it was the moment to go into details. "Here . . . Sorry . . . didn't know I was carrying gore." I gave her my breast-pocket handkerchief. "Why would your boss want to kill this double for Trevagno when he knows the fellow doesn't have the tape recordings? Even if he put the guy out of the way the tapes would still be —"

"No, no!" She seized my arm again, heedless of the blood. "You misunderstand. *You're the one I'm afraid for! You have those tapes! You're the one he's so terribly angry at! Don't you see!*"

I felt like laughing but I didn't; she was too serious, too concerned for my safety. "Mister Steventz hasn't made fifty or sixty million by going off half-cocked like that, Nita. He won't come a-smoking after me. He knows that he couldn't keep whatever's on those wire-tapping records from being heard by the authorities . . . if he was crazy enough to take a shot at me. I think you have him wrong; I don't think I'm the one he's after, at all." I nodded casually to the *major domo* at the doorway of the Crystal Room, led her toward the sound of clicking chips and the croupier's chant. "Is your boss here yet?"

"No. That's why I hurried over to warn you." She tightened her grasp on my arm. "You may think I'm wrong but promise me you won't get into any dispute with him! Promise?"

"Do my best," I said. "But the promises I've been making lately have had a bad way of backfiring on me. Let's get over there where we can watch the madding throng."

The room was swarming with celebrities and Social Register-ites.

It was quarter to nine — we'd been in there long enough to give a once-over to every man in the room who might be the masquerading Trevagno

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— when Nita squeezed my arm hard. "There they are!"

The Consolidator and Florence Steventz were being given the red carpet treatment by a smooth individual who must have been at least an assistant manager of the casino. Florence looked magnificent. Steventz seemed to be angry. It was an indication of the upper-crust quality of the clientele that their entrance caused few heads to turn.

One that did turn was a close-shaven bullet-head which set on the shortest, thickest neck I'd ever seen outside a wrestling performance on teevee. The shoulders beneath it were grappler's shoulders, too, and the muscular legs were in keeping. The man's face, however, as it was half turned toward me from a table a dozen feet away, might have been that of a petulant fat child . . . round inquiring eyes, plump pink cheeks, pouting juvenile lips. He must have been in his thirties.

With the bland eyes still on Steventz, the man reached for a small stack of chips on the table in front of him. He dropped the chips into the side pocket of his white gabardine jacket, moved away from the table. But he made no attempt to cross the room toward the Steventzes.

I said: "That might be the stooge, Nita."

She breathed: "Oh, Gil. Be careful. Suppose he is . . . ?"

"There's an easy way to find out." I put more confidence into it than I felt. He didn't seem to be the sort of individual who'd care to have a trick played on him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"STAY HERE," I told Nita, "and put a few on the red for me while I see if I can set up a better mousetrap."

"Oh! Be careful, now!"

Fat Boy had disengaged himself from the group at the table where he'd been betting, seemed to be strolling aimlessly around the casino. His stroll took him slowly in the direction of the Steventzes.

Out in the elaborate foyer I stopped a waiter with a champagne cart. "Is there some room where I can write a note-more or less privately?" I asked.

He considered. "There's the little baccarat room, sir. It's seldom in use weekends." He pointed. "You might try in there, sir."

The baccarat room was about twenty by thirty with gobelins on the walls, persians on the floor and a chandelier that had enough cut glass on it to sink an aircraft carrier.

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I wrote two notes; one to Steventz asking him to step into the baccarat room as soon as might be convenient, the other addressed to no one, stating that if the recipient would go to the Japanese bridge in the gardens, the writer would join him there in a moment. That one I signed *S.*

A page boy palmed my silver dollar like a magician and took the first note to the Consolidator.

Fat Boy was close to them; he advanced with a clumsy, tied-in, muscle-bound shuffle. Steventz and his wife were punting at *rouge.et noir;* for all I could have told, he was intent on his betting. Florence kept glancing up, searching the faces that shuttled in and out like colors in a kaleidoscope.

The page boy edged through to Steventz. At that distance I couldn't see the transfer of the note; I doubted that Fat Boy could have. Steventz spoke briefly to his wife, left the table, moved ponderously out toward the baccarat room.

Florence noticed Fat Boy. Her eyes held on him for a second, flashed around the casino, returned to him, puzzled. He began circling the long table toward her.

The page boy said: "Mission completed, sir." I held out a second cartwheel. "See that gentleman with no neck? Fat one? Low forehead, pouty lips?" I handed over the other note. "If he asks you who gave it to you, tell him it's from a Mister Steventz."

He gave me a quizzical squint. "You got any more *billet doux* to be delivered, mister? I'd as leave play you as buck the tables."

I wended my way back toward Nita.

Fat Boy got his note. I could see him making the expected inquiry. The page boy gave him a short answer, slid away. Fat Boy seemed to be debating whether to approach Mrs. Steventz or follow written instructions. He decided on the latter, wheeled about, left the casino.

"That's our man, Nita." I came up behind her at the table. "He's sniffed at the bait. I'm going out to pow-wow with him by that bench where you waited for me."

"You're not going to let him talk to Bill!"

"Not if I can help it. But I have to find out what he knows, what it is he has to sell."

I patted her shoulder, in the approved big-brother manner.

She wasn't a mite reassured. "What are you going to do with the information, when you find out?"

"Depends," I said, "on what it is."

The red glow of his cigar showed me he was planted on the bench. I hove to, alongside.

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"Evening, Mister Trevagno . . . pardon, your name's not Trevagno, is it?"

"No more'n yours ain't Steventz." He looked me over.

"I'm representing his interests tonight."

"I only deal with principals." He couldn't pronounce his *r*'s; it sounded like "pwincipals" . . .

I said: "You'll deal with me or not at all. I'm not at all sure I ought to deal with you; how do I know you represent Dossier?"

"I've got cwedentials." He didn't attempt to show them to me. "I'm Ken Souk. I was outside man. Merle was inside. He covered the hotel. I covered the yacht. Who're you?"

"Vine. Security officer at the *Palms*."

"We-e-ll." He came to his feet, hand out. "Whyn't you *say* so? He wised me to you. We won't have any twouble getting togetheh."

I didn't see the outstretched hand. The idea that Trevagno had convinced even his partner that I was in on the wire-trap setup didn't set well. "I don't know about that. You claim you were close to Trevagno?"

"We pooled all our dor e. How else would I have the low on these cawwy-ins-on?"

"Somebody got too close to Trevagno for his own good," I said. "I wouldn't want to make that mistake."

He made the glowing tip of the cigar describe a picturesque arc. "Don't let anybody guff you. He shot himself. Know why?"

I asked why.

"He had two stwikes on him, see what I mean?"

I did. "He'd had two felony convictions behind him?"

"An' a conspiwacy indictment comin' up, yeh." Souk grinned as if at a great joke. "They couldn't miss; he knew it. He twied to make one last sweet touch, — you need a wad to pay appeal fees, like that — but he wan out of time. He got a phone call from Miami this mawning telling him the Fedewals would be awound by noon; they had him staked out cold. That did it. He told me many's the time he'd do the Dutch wather than do a life stwetch. You didn' know that?"

"No," I told him. "But it might help if you told the police."

"Me? Cwy cop? Hoh!" He guffawed. "That'd be the end of the line fo' me, pally! No badges in mine, thanks. All I want is the C.O.D. payoff but sudden."

"C.O.D.?"

"You know. Collect On Dirt. We weally got some to peddle." He leered. "Some of that boodwah badinage must have come neah melting the soldeh on the bug connections."

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"How much do you expect him to pay for these tapes?"

His eyes were crafty.

"I'll be weasonable. No need to split with Twevagno now. We meant to ask fifty. I'll take twenty-five."

I smiled. "Twenty-five thousand for tape records you don't even have! The police have impounded them!"

He let smoke dribble out of his snout. "Pally, you think we opewated in our sleep? I got typed weports of evewy single goddam wecording. Including the one wheah this babe says she's pwegnant."

There was a gasp behind me, a little cry.

I wheeled around. Nita stood there, half hidden by one of the flowering shrubs.

Souk backed away from the bench to the railing of the little bridge. "What is this . . . a fwameup?"

Nita cried: "Yes! Yes! It is! That's what you're doing! Framing —"

"*Shaddap!*" He interrupted her coarsely. "I wasn't talkin' to you, babe, — I was talking to this wepwesentative of Bill Steventz to see if we could find some way to save him embawassment and difficulties in the divohce co't —"

A siren wailed, wailed again, louder, nearer.

Souk scowled, twisting his head toward the entrance to the club grounds.

Nita cried: "*Gil! . . . I forgot! . . . what I came to tell you! . . . the police . . . !*"

I know it's considered a dirty trick to hit a man when he isn't looking. But I did it then with a clear conscience.

I knew I'd only have one chance to make an impression on that neckless head; I couldn't have coped with him if it came to a gutter-style go. So I swung from my shoes.

He grunted as he toppled backward into the little Japanese pond.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SOUK WENT DOWN with a tremendous splash but the water wasn't very deep, four feet maybe. I wasn't sure whether or not I'd knocked him out but I thought it likely the water'd revive him if I had. But I stripped off my coat in case I had to go in for him.

Nita pushed at me. "Hurry . . . they'll be here in a minute."

I watched the Dossier operative surface with a wreath of lilies and

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hyacinth encircling his head. "How'd you know the cops were after me, Nita?"

"Florence told me. Said a Lieutenant Parry'd called Bill here to ask if you were with him and Bill had said he expected you to be here . . . so Parry said he'd be over to pick you up."

Souk half swam, half waded to the edge of the pool, glared up at me. He did a spring up, resting his weight on those wrestlers arms. I pushed his face, he spluttered with fury, sloshed back into the pool.

"Stay as sweet as you are," I told him. "You'll be in a nice dry spot shortly."

Nita caught hold of my shoulder. "Gil! You're not going to let them *get* you!"

"I'm staying. So're you. Listen." I flung an arm around her bare shoulders; she didn't move away. "After this tubby Tarzan and I have gone for a ride in the paddy wagon, go to your boss, tell him two things, for me."

"What two things?"

"One, no hotel employee was in on the wire-tap at all. This imitation Trevagno is another Dossier wiretapper named Souk, who's been planting electronic bugs on the *Fancy Free*. Got that?"

Souk shouted: "Help . . . Police . . . *Murder!!*"

Nita chattered. "Yes . . . what's the other thing?"

I said: "Tell him I say he doesn't need to sweat up a fret about what Souk has to sell him. This bedraggled water buffalo wants twenty-five thousand for alleged dope I wouldn't pay four-bits for."

She kissed me. On the neck, to be sure, but still . . .

"Gil! You darling! You don't believe him, do you?"

"Hell, of course I don't," I said. But I did.

I let the Fat Boy clamber out then. The patrol car had stopped ten feet behind me. Parry and another officer, a uniformed patrolman, were busting out of the coop with guns leveled.

Parry poked me with his pistol: "What's going on here, Mister Vine?"

"Holding a prisoner for you, Lieutenant." I moved aside as Souk sloshed up to dry ground, swinging at me.

"Pwisoner, my eye!" Souk bawled. "He twies to dwown me!" He found himself facing the patrolman's gun.

Parry said: "You're under arrest, Vine; you're not in a position to hold a prisoner."

"You're mistaken, Lieutenant," I said. "I held him *before* I was under arrest. You'll be making a much bigger mistake if you let him go."

The Lieutenant employed his little finger in the earboring operation. "Are you prepared to sign charges?"

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"Sure I am. Book him for attempted extortion. He just tried to get twenty-five thousand bucks for some of the wire-tap dope his late partner Trevagno dug up. Young lady here will testify to it."

Parry looked at her, at Souk, at me. "I don't know . . ."

I said: "What's more important, I think you might inquire as to his whereabouts this evening around the time that Aliga boy was murdered and McDonnell nearly killed. At least hold him until Big Mac can get a look at him."

Parry said: "The fish camp owner's still unconscious. They don't expect him to live the night."

"All the more reason to hold this Souk," I said. "He was Trevagno's partner; one of the things he just said to me was that with Trevagno dead there'd be no need to split the blackmail."

"*Oh!*" Souk howled. "*You wotten liah!*"

Parry nodded to his henchman in blue. "Let's take 'em both in."

The patrolman looked at Nita. "Her, too?"

I said: "Miss Bass is William Steventz's private secretary. She's here at the casino with Mister and Missus Steventz. They'll be responsible for her appearance to make any necessary depositions."

Lieutenant Parry shook his head. "All the same, she'll come along with us."

And she did.

At the station they let Nita stay in the waiting room off the booking desk. Souk went to the lavatory to scrape mud out of his hair. Parry took me into his office.

"I'm sorry to see things work out like this, Vine . . . but you see my position." He pulled out a Charge sheet, gave it to me to fill out against Souk.

"I don't think you see mine, Lieutenant." I talked fast while I took my time filling in the accusation blanks. "When this Trevagno thing happened, my first intention was to keep the business as quiet as possible, for the hotel's sake. Now, whether the final verdict's suicide or homicide, that good intention's just another paving stone in hell."

He said: "Washington wires me that Trevagno'd served two to five in Atlanta and five to seven in Danbury. He might have had a nervous breakdown, worrying about a possible third conviction on these Senate charges. But that's pure conjecture; it doesn't help you much."

"Help or hinder, I don't give a damn," I said. "Hell with Trevagno and all his tribe. What I'm interested in now is finding the man who beat the brains out of one of the finest kids who ever worked for the *Palms Plaza Hotel.* You ought to understand that, Lieutenant. I stand in the same position with

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my staff over there as you do with the men on your force. If some murderer caved in the skull of one of your patrolmen, you'd go all the way down the line to put that man where he belonged, wouldn't you?"

Parry conducted another excavating expedition on his ear. "Can't hold that sort of feeling against you, no indeed. Feel the same way myself, admit that. But I can't do one thing *about* it, that's the truth."

"Sure you can." I shoved the signed accusation of extortion across to him. "Let me phone Charner Clarke."

He chewed on that one. It didn't taste good to him. "What you going to say to Mister Clarke?"

"I'm going to give the Grand Panjandrum something to unsour his disposition," I said. "You'll be right here to listen."

He chewed some more. "I'll speak to him first. See if he wants to talk to you."

He got the Charner *schloss*, spoke to the great man. "I got that Vine fella here in my office, Mister Clarke. He wants to say something to you . . . if you got time to hear it."

Evidently Clarke had the time: Parry held out the phone.

"Good evening," I said.

"Finding out it would've been better to be a little more cooperative, are you, young man?" He chuckled.

"You might be right about that," I admitted, "but I've sure found out a few other things, too. You didn't tell me you'd been hiring two Dossier wire-tappers down here but we've got the second one here in the jailhouse now. One in the funeral parlor, the other behind bars on extortion charges with two witnesses to make it copper riveted."

He was delighted. "*You* have him in jail? That's excellent, excellent. You're there yourself."

"For the moment," I agreed. "But when our lawyers present the extortion case to the grand jury the charges against me'll look pretty silly. Because your man Souk wanted me to be the middleman on a twenty-five thousand dollar blackmail setup . . . and he wouldn't have done that if I'd been in on the deal."

"It might," Clarke's voice was almost soothing; "be some time before those charges get to a Grand Jury in this county."

It was my cue to laugh. "I can believe it. But some of the stuff will get to the papers right fast. The stuff about your milking your corporations for every nickel, concealment of assets from stockholders —"

Parry said: "Here, now!" at the same instant Clarke said: "Hold on!" Parry reached for the phone.

I kept it. And kept talking: "I've some evidence, locked up over in the

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hotel, about that concealment of assets, Mister Clarke. If that happens to get in the financial papers, it might shoot up the price of the stocks your brokers are trying to corral."

He snarled at me: "I *don't* know. I never heard of it until just this minute."

"Then you know it now," I said. "You still want me locked up?" I handed the instrument to Parry.

Parry said: "Lieutenant Parry, Mister Clarke . . . Yes, yes, I did. . . . Well, now, I don't know . . . I expect you're just right, sir . . . yes, sir."

He hung up, pushed his straw back off his forehead, swiveled around in his chair to look at me:

"What sorta nerve tonic you specify when you step up to the bar, Mister Vine? I'd kinda like to sample your brand sometime."

CHAPTER TWENTY

I SUPPOSE THE LIEUTENANT thought I'd talked myself out of a tight spot. I knew better.

Parry rubbed the broken bridge of his wooden-Indian nose. "Now you're a free agent, you still stick to it, this damp specimen in the cell is the one who beat up your bellboy?"

I was cagey.

"He might be," I said. "He could be. First place, he's the sort of scum-bum you could hire to commit any crime in the book; one'll get you three if he doesn't have a record nearly equal to Trevagno's. Second place, he's the kind of strong-arm boy who could have tackled a guy like Big Mac and put him away."

"You didn't see him out at this fish camp?"

"No one did unless Big Mac did. But Kilroy was there and you have this lad on another legitimate charge. If you find out he was driving a black two-door, probably a Pontiac, they might be able to check the tires with the marks in that sand out at *Sans Souci*."

"That'll be up to the Sheriff," Parry said. "And by the way, we're giving you a clean slate but you'll have to look out for yourself in the clinches with the Deputies."

I said I'd try to do that.

"They liken to be rough sometimes," he warned. "If this McDonnell

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dies, it won't be so good for you." He touched my coat which lay folded on my knees. "Especially if they see that stain."

"First aid to the injured, Lieutenant, all it was. I'll take the young lady along with me."

He said: "Hm . . . I don't know, now . . ."

"She comes with me," I was firm, "or I start phoning the papers."

He sighed.

"Meantime don't you think you owe me and Miss Bass a free ride back to Ye Olde Spinning Wheel?"

"Drive you over myself." And he did.

Nita said not a word until she thanked him for the buggy ride. But when the patrol car had crunched down the *Assembly's* gravel driveway she made up for lost time:

"How'd you talk yourself out of there? Why'd they let me go after telling me they were going to hold me as a . . . a material witness? Do you still want me to tell Bill about that awful creature you knocked into the pond?"

"To answer the last first, let's let it ride; Souk can't bargain with anybody where he is." I led her toward the station wagon. "We might be able to pull that snake's fangs if you don't mind helping me burgle a bit."

"How can I help?" Her eyes shone at the prospect.

"First, show me how to get to your boss's yacht." While she directed me over to the Lake Trail and the Floridana Basin, I gave her a short fill-in on my talk with Charner Clarke. "You see, what started as a bit of conniving on his part to make it possible for him to anticipate Steventz's moves in this merger battle, turned out to be hotter than he thought. Trevagno's death might go down in the record as suicide, but there's been another murder . . . and the heat's going to get up to frying temperature."

"Another?" It was an almost inaudible echo.

"Santos," I said. "Beaten to death at a fish camp down the Lake."

She whispered "No!" as if she was afraid I'd hear her. "When?"

"Six. Little after. Where was your boss around that time?"

"I . . . I don't know," she answered.

"Where were you?"

"In the suite typing out some letters for Ricky."

"Duffield there at the hotel with you?"

"No." She sat still after I'd parked the car, cut the switch. "He and Flo were at the cabana." She gazed blankly at the long pier where the hundred and sixty footer was tied up. "You don't imagine Bill would ever kill anyone!"

"Imagination," I said, "is something I find very little use for."

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"He never would," she said stonily. "Never!"

"Somebody did," I reminded her. "Trevagno. Then Santos. And by now the man I took to the hospital, with a fractured skull he got for rushing to Santo's rescue, may be a third victim. I don't say Steventz is the one we're after. Maybe I'll have a clearer idea about that after the enterprising burglar's done his burgling. Who's likely to be aboard the yacht now?"

Nita came out of her trance. "Four or five of the crew; Captain Piper'll be there and a cook, the steward, Flo's maid, the other engineer probably. Are you thinking of robbing the *Fancy Free?*"

"She's already been robbed." I admired the graceful white hull reflected in the water by the pier lights, the glistening mahogany, the gleaming plate glass, the awninged afterdeck. "What I'm after is the loot."

She didn't understand but she slid out of the seat and walked down to the basin with me.

For Owners and Guests Only: Floridana Basin. There was a smaller craft, a ninety foot houseboat, alongside the pier which ran out into Lake Worth parallel to the one where the *Fancy Free* lay in splendor. Between the two main docks ran a shorter pier, with a ramp leading down to a float. Four little cruisers were berthed along the short side of the *U.*

"Can you find a flashlight on board?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Then find one and bring it back to the dock with you. I'll be hunting for something I dropped on the pier . . . a seven dollar gold piece. What I'll want is the flashlight and five minutes without being interfered with. If any of the crew, particularly the Captain, gets curious about what I'm doing, your job is to distract 'em." I couldn't see anyone above deck on the *Fancy Free*; it was half-past ten and probably some of them would have bunked down.

"What *are* you going to be doing?" Nita asked.

"Hunting for roaches," I said inelegantly. "I'm starting now." I let a dime drop. It rolled away into the shadow of the stringpiece. "If you have a flashlight on board," I made no attempt to keep my voice down, "that would help."

I was down on hands and knees, peering at the mooring lines, the electric connections to the yacht, the gangplank, when she stepped aboard.

It was easier than I'd expected. A small, white rubber insulated wire fixed to the underside of the gangplank. I couldn't see where the wire went on the yacht other than that it snaked under a handrail leading to the afterdeck. But the pier side was a cinch to trace.

It ran straight across beneath the stringers to the opposite side, along beneath the edge of the planks.

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Nita hurried back with the flashlight. "They're watching television in the lounge."

"I've located a more interesting channel," I followed the wire back toward shore, "but it probably isn't broadcasting right now."

She understood then. "A wire-tap!"

"Souk's long donkey-ear, sure." It went to a spot beneath the wharf to where a stern line dropped to the cleat of a forty foot Chris Craft, a bridge-decker with *Chantey Boat* on the stern in gilt. There was a warm light showing from the cabin ports.

"Is this where . . . he did his nasty work?" Nita breathed.

"Soon find out." I leaned over, cupped a hand. "Hello, below . . . anybody alive aboard the wreck?"

No answer.

"I'm going down." I swung off onto the wooden pier ladder. "You sit tight. Whistle or drop a shoe on the deck or something if anyone inquisitive shows up."

She was frightened. "Suppose it isn't his boat. Suppose he has someone working with him!"

"In that case, you might have to whistle for the cops." I went down, dropped to the deck.

No one came up out of the cabin. No one on any of the other yachts seemed to have shown any curiosity.

I tried the deckhouse door. It was unlocked.

She called down softly: "All right?"

"So far . . ." I went in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE GALLEY WAS EMPTY. Dirty dishes stacked a foot high in the monel sink. Enough unwashed stainless steel cutlery heaped on the drainboard to make place settings for the Lucullan Lounge.

In the forward cabin, nothing. I went aft, to the owner's cabin.

It was Souk's *sanctum sanctorum*, all right. Bunk unmade. Dirty clothes heaped on the opposite bunk . . . the gaudy but not neat shirts were the XLs he'd have needed. And on the dresser, between the bunks, was the recording machine with the little white wire leading to it from the after-deck of the *Fancy Free*.

I combed that cabin, — dresser, lockers, shelves, luggage. All I found

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was a batch of receipts which he'd evidently been using to make out an expense account. One of the receipts was from the Masland Yacht Brokerage for a month's charter of the *Chantey Boat*, $750. Charner Clark had really been putting out.

Nowhere was there any sign of the typed reports which Souk claimed Trevagno'd made of each of the tapes. Had that been a bluff? More I mulled it over, the surer I was that the note on the typewriter in El Greco had been the beginning of a typed transcription rather than a suicide note. It was too melodramatic for a man whose daily stint had been the sneakiest kind of melodrama.

But I couldn't find the copies Souk had bragged about. Maybe he'd cached them ashore. Still, if he'd been meeting Trevagno right along or had arranged to have the transcripts left somewhere to be picked up, it would have been the natural thing to have kept them on board where he could have read 'em over at leisure.

That made me think: — if Trevagno'd been having the transcripts sent out of the hotel, Santos would probably have been the one who took them from El Greco. Had that been the real reason for Trevagno's pretended anger at the kid? For somebody trailing him to *Sans Souci*, slugging him?

I gave up on the cabin, went up to the deckhouse.

The deckhouse was a lounge; all the piloting gadgets were up on the flying bridge above. A liquor cabinet; Souk favored rye, from the contents. Magazines, a couple of books on the technical aspects of tape recording, a Washington phone directory —

There was no phone connection such as some docks make available. Not even a ship-to-shore set. I examined the directory. The directory pages had been removed; only the cover had been left as a blind for a pack of loose transcript pages.

The paper was white bond like that on the suicide note; type was the same as that on Trevagno's machine. I riffled through some of the sheets. One with *Very Very Pertinent* at the top recalled the *VVP* on the label of one of the tape cases:

> Conversation between High Tenor and Bellowing Bass, 4:00 to 4:24, 1/8/56, MT recording:
>
> HT: He's been loading those annual statements for ten years with development and equipment costs that were never incurred, Bill.
>
> BB: One thing to state it, another to prove it.
>
> HT: If we can get control, we can prove it, don't worry. That

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treasurer at the Niagara plant will expose the whole swindle if we can guarantee his future.

BB: Don't depend on it, Ricky. Man who'll sell out one employer will sell out another. I wouldn't put it past Cuthridge to have feathered his own nest nicely.

HT: We're going to need him, to get those proxies, Bill. We could make an agreement to up his salary for say the next five years . . . then, after things are running smoothly, find a loophole in the agreement.

BB: Hell with that. Offer him a lump sum to come in on the proxy deal and promise him nothing. I don't want a turncoat handling financial affairs for me no matter how much he's helped me. Go as high as you need to, nail down the Guggenheim shares but don't go overboard on promises, understand?

A thump, a foot from my head, knocked the Consolidator's dealings for a loop; she'd taken me at my word and dropped a shoe on the deckhouse top. I made it out of the deckhouse in two jumps, the Washington tapescript volume under my arm.

Nita was halfway down the long ladder, her head below the level of the dock. She clung there, looking down at me:

"Bill . . . !" she whispered. "And Flo . . . coming down the dock. Look out . . . *they'll see you!*"

I crouched there in the waterway behind a canvas dodger.

The *calumph-calung* of heels overhead came closer. Nita froze to the rungs. I noticed the shoeless, nyloned foot bracing her in as flat against the ladder as possible.

Florence was only a few yards distant; she sounded as if she was crying . . . or about to:

"But after all, Bill . . . *it was almost the same as murder!*"

His voice was like grinding gears: "Tell you for the last time, Florence . . . that's done and finished with." The steps moved beyond us; they hadn't seen us. "You don't have to keep harping on it."

She didn't answer, unless a torrent of weeping can be so considered.

We held the pose, Nita and I, until the Steventzes reached the *Fancy Free's* gangplank, went aboard.

Then I stood up. "Okay," I called softly. "Go on up."

"*Stupid!*" she hissed, "they're right there on deck, they'll see me."

"You can't hang on there all night," I said. "Come on down."

She shifted her grip; lowered herself a rung. Her stocking foot slipped;

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she fell . . . between the pier and the hull of the *Chantey Boat*. She cried out once, sharply, before I flung myself over the rail, grabbed at her to pin her against the ladder.

There was a loud splash — the Washington directory went overside. But I caught her . . . just as her head banged into the upright beam of the ladder.

For perhaps ten seconds I struggled there leaning far out over the rail, supporting her dead weight.

Doors slammed open on other yachts, hatches lifted. Steventz ran back to the dock calling: "Somebody overboard?"

I thought Nita'd merely fainted but when I managed to hoist her across to the rail of the forty footer I saw blood was trickling down the side of her face.

Florence called from up above: "Somebody must have fallen off one of the cruisers, Bill!"

I swung Nita inboard, carried her into the deckhouse, put her on the floor while I closed the deckhouse door.

Half a dozen people ranged along the dock above us. I didn't want any curious visitors; I thought it would be easy to see me in the half light. So I lugged her to Souk's cabin, deposited her on a bunk.

Either she was out cold or she was a superb actress; her legs were limp as a floppy rag doll's. I litened for indications of a boarding party, heard only snatches of comments:

"Somebody heaving garbage over . . ."

"Heard a girl holler, though —"

"Might have been youngsters, horsing."

I fetched ice and towels, from the galley and the head, dried the blood off her face. There was a bump big as half a pullet's egg on her right temple.

"If you took that fall on purpose," I said aloud to myself, "to make me drop those transcripts overboard, you sure did it the hard way."

I peered out the windows of that after cabin for some sign of papers drifting. There were none; the tide was running out fast and the current must have carried them away.

She didn't stir. I kept on with the ice, trying to decide how far I should go with that first advice about loosening the garments of an unconscious person.

Maybe she had a concussion of the brain! What would happen to me if I showed up at that Emergency Entrance with another victim, I didn't care to speculate about.

"Look, darling!"

The voice was right at my ear — but it wasn't Nita.

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"Strewn all over the water . . . see?" Florence . . . on the listen-in contraption at my elbow. Souk had left the switch on Speaker. What I was hearing was directly from the after-deck of the *Fancy Free.*

Bill's booming baritone rumbled so loudly I hastened to tone the volume down. "That's what we heard, sure. Somebody dropped over a bunch of papers. Hell, if I had a flashlight I could read what's on those pages from here. Where's that flashlight?"

Nitá seized my arm. "*Bill!*" she moaned.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

FLORENCE'S VOICE WAS FAINT, fading in: "I can't find the flash, Bill."

"Too late, anyway; stuff's all drifted away." And *Bill* faded away.

I was sopping a cold cloth on Nita's forehead when they came back into range of the bug.

Florence said: "It isn't something you can forget so easily, like turning off a faucet, you know."

"Don't be a dilly!" boomed the baritone. "You can't live with it on the tip of your tongue. Stop thinking about it; if I can, you ought to be able to."

Florence wailed: "You act as if memory was a slate — as if you can erase anything you want to."

"If I can't erase it," Steventz answered harshly, "I can always break the slate!"

Nita flung a hand up to the bump on her head. "*Don't Bill! Don't!* You'll be sorry!" Her eyes were still closed; she was rambling.

I recalled that folks with brain injuries did sometimes wander, mentally, just before dying. *Won't you be in a fine fix*, I asked myself, *if this girl dies here and now? Who'll believe she fell off the ladder after your being on the spot at Trevagno's death, at Santos?*

Was ice the right thing for a restorative . . . or should I try a hot cloth? Should I sling her over my shoulder and lug her up to the wharf, regardless of the Steventzs?

I kept on with the ice, the cold cloths. Nita stirred, moaned, clutched at my wrist. But she didn't open her eyes.

There was a lull on the loudspeaker. Something clicked on a battery of tubes in a black case behind the recorder. The recorder spool began to turn, slowly, noiselessly. One of Souk's microphones in some other part of the *Fancy Free*, I decided, had been set into operation automatically.

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Nita suddenly sat up on the bunk, dazed.

"Top of the morning," I said cheerily. "Have a nice nap?"

She felt her forehead, "What time is it?"

"Eleven," I said. "Feel a trifle rocky?"

"My head's exploding." Nita swung her legs to the cabin floor but didn't try to stand.

In the hollow zombietone of the recording-speaker, Bill said: "He'd only have gone to the pen if he'd lived; it isn't as if his life was useful to anyone."

Nita sprang up before Steventz finished, terrified.

Florence said: "Useful to Charner Clarke, wasn't he?"

I pointed to the apparatus. "Induction coils, amplifiers, tape recorders . . . the roaches I told you I was looking for."

She stared, awed. "Is it . . . a tape recording?"

"This is live," I told her. "We have a peep-hole view . . . or audition . . . of the after-deck of the *Fancy Free*, with your boss and his wife bickering."

The speaker erupted: "Once and for all, Flossie, *cut it out!* Go down and get packed! We're flying north at midnight; forty-eight hours from now we'll be in Cannes or Capri or wherever you like; we'll make a fresh start. Go on, now . . . we haven't much time."

Nita said "Oh!" clapping a hand over her mouth.

Florence's answer trailed off as she left the vicinity of that bug Souk had hidden on the after-deck. "I'll feel better when the plane is . . ."

Nita sat down abruptly.

"How," I asked, "about a spot of stimulant? You look as if you could use a drink. I know I could."

She nodded. "What happened . . . out there? I fell . . . ?"

I told her, poured two neat ryes.

"You didn't hurt yourself?" She choked on the whisky but got it down.

"Not a bit." I wondered if she'd mention the telephone directory; she didn't. I couldn't decide whether she'd taken that fall on purpose or not.

She peered into the mirror on the dresser. "I look like something the cat wouldn't bother to drag in. But I'll have to get back to the hotel, no matter how I look."

"Figuring on taking that plane north with 'em?" I asked.

"Of course." She seemed surprised. "I'm not exactly indispensable. But I'm reasonably important to Bill . . . in his business. And until this magnesium combination is completed . . ." she didn't finish.

I said. "You feel able to climb that ladder or you want me to carry you up?"

"I can make it." She seemed a bit wobbly, getting up to the deckhouse

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but she didn't hesitate out on deck. "Didn't you . . ." she looked around for her shoe . . . "weren't you carrying something when I called to warn you?"

"Nothing that matters." I recovered the shoe, brought it to her. "Set?"

She went up first, paused with her head at dock level. "Coast is clear."

"So far," I said for the second time. I thought it might not be when we got to the hotel.

Sitting beside me in the station wagon she said: "I'm an ungrateful wretch. I haven't even thanked you for saving my life. You *did* save my life."

"No Carnegie medal, by request. Tell me, does Bill Steventz's plane have a name?"

"Why . . . yes." She seemed miffed by my attitude. "It's the *Aces High*. Why do you ask?"

"Cops may want to know." I was candid but I couldn't help being a bit cryptic; we were rolling in past the pretentious gates of the *Palms Plaza;* minutes were important. "Will the Steventzes come back to the hotel for their things or will you pack for them?"

"I don't know."

"If they call and ask you to get their bags ready, let me know, will you, Nita? I'll be in the El Greco suite."

She wavered.

"It'll work out best," I cut the ignition. "You'll have to take my word for it."

We went in the main entrance. I couldn't have caused more excitement if I'd come in brandishing a Tommy gun. The desk clerk waved at me, Connie dropped the Bell Desk phone and rushed across the lobby toward me. And Matt Gregory lumbered over from the door of my office:

"Crisis, Gil! The head man's raisin' the roof! He wants to see you, but *pronto!*"

Connie cried: "Is it on the level about Santos? Was he croaked?"

I said: "It's true, Connie. Where's Gee Gee, Matt?"

Connie asked: "Who did it, Mister Vine?"

Matt said: "In his suite, Gil. He's made me Actin' Chief, Gil!"

I rattled off orders just as if I was still in command: "Take this key, go down in the Mens Locker Room, bring me up the attaché case that's in the locker, Matt." I didn't give him time to argue, walked toward the General Manager's suite, beckoned to Connie.

Nita was already on her way to Zuloaga.

"The assistant wine steward is holding some packages for me, Connie," I said. "Have him bring 'em to my office and wait for me."

"Yes, sir." He paused long enough to add: "Sure tough about Santy."

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"Real tough." I knocked on Gee Gee's door.

"Come in," he roared.

He was sitting in his favorite overstuffed club chair.

Charner Clarke lounged gracefully on the divan. He greeted me with a mephistophelian grin:

"My apologies to you, sir, — my abject apologies. I was totally wrong about your having had any interest in the Trevagno man's death. It was the bellboy, after all."

Gee Gee roared: "Goddam it, Gill. What you mean, running off at a time like this!"

I said: "Just a sec, skipper. Mister Clarke, what was that remark about the bellboy?"

"Why," he waved languidly, "I thought you'd have heard. The sheriff's men found Trevagno's diamond ring in the Aliga boy's car. It was a simple case of murder for robbery."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"YOUR APOLOGY," I said, "doesn't go far enough. And it's addressed to the wrong party."

Clarke arched his eyebrows. "So?"

"So." I made a hold-off-a-minute gesture to Gee Gee, whose color was deep purple. "You owe Santos the apology. He was no robber; he was too honest for his own good. He had nothing whatever to do with the murder of your Listening Tom, Trevagno; he was killed because he wanted to do what he thought was the right thing. He was one damned fine kid. I mean to clear his name if I never cock another pistol."

The financier gave me a mocking bow. "Why did he run away, Mister Vine?"

"He thought he'd make trouble for the hotel if he stayed. He used bad judgment but he never stole any solitaire; I'll guarantee the ring was planted in his car by the man who bashed Santos's brains out. What's more," I went way out on the limb, — I could almost feel it cracking beneath me, "I'll guarantee to prove it."

Gee Gee came to his feet. "How was he going to save us trouble by clearing out?"

"He thought there'd be another homicide if he stuck around for the cops to question him. Well, there was . . . only it turned out to be his own."

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I gave one barrel to Clarke. "Why would he have been killed if he'd shot Trevagno, tell me that."

Clarke shrugged. "I suppose he was murdered for the loot."

I let go with the other barrel. "He was beaten to death to keep him from naming the person who did shoot Trevagno. And I think Trevagno can tell us who that was."

Clarke got it. "On those tape recordings?"

"Possibly you didn't know," I thought I might avoid another argument, "that he'd made transcriptions of his eavesdroppings . . . on paper."

He gave me the blackest of glares. "Lieutenant Parry made no mention of any papers. Did you remove them from Trevagno's suite?"

"No. But I know where they are." I did, in an approximate sense. Floating on Lake Worth or out the inlet . . .

Gee Gee clamped a paw on my shoulder. "It's too late to prevent the smelly publicity about a murder. You say you can clear this bellman on the theft charges. All right. I'll back you on that. But for godsake don't let the papers get wind of this wire-tapping mess! That gets out, we'll have to run schoolteacher excursions in here at two dollars a head to keep the house count above fifty percent.

"I need some help. Someone to put a flea in the Sheriff's ear," I said.

The General Manager of the Waugh hotels came through in fine style. "Hell, that's easy. Charner, you know how to grab hold of those boys in a tender spot, you can take care of that."

The Last of the Old Guard looked as if he had swallowed a cud of chewing tobacco. "What is it you want, Vine?"

"Your friend Bill Steventz is planning to fly back to New York in about half an hour with his entourage," I said. "His private flying carpet is a twin motor Beechcraft called *Aces High*. It's over at the airport in West Palm Beach and I think it ought to stay there until this matter's cleared up."

Gee Gee chimed right in. "Got something there, hasn't he, Charner?"

The bad taste expression vanished from Clarke's face. "I should think that might be an admirable procedure. Unlike our impulsive friend I can't guarantee anything," he offered me the mock bow once more, "but I'll call the Sheriff, see what can be done."

He used the phone.

I shook hands with Gee Gee. "Mind if I put Matt to work?"

"Now don't take it out on Matt," he reproved me. "I had to have someone who'd stay in the house *part* of the time. Matt means well."

"He gets in his own way," I said. "That's why I can use him."

As I left Gee Gee's suite, Clarke was describing the *Aces High* to someone, with considerable relish.

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Connie hovered just outside the suite. "Rene heard about it, Mister Vine. He said you were out there . . ."

"I was, Connie. Tell you about it after you've helped me snare a skunk."

"Yes, sir?"

"I'll be up in El Greco. Bye and bye I'll buzz you to ask you what you've found out about the condition of the man at the hospital, Big Mac, — the fellow who got hurt rushing to rescue Santos." I told him what to say and how to say it.

By that time I was at my office. Matt was plumped down in my chair with the attaché case on my blotter; he scowled when he saw me. "Take it up to El Greco, wait for me," I told him.

He was uncertain whether to take orders from me so I growled: "Get the hell out of my chair," and he did. He carried the attaché case away as if it contained his aching heart.

The assistant wine steward came in with the camera cases and took the armful up to El Greco.

Nita and the Zuloaga door cracked just enough to see me.

She came out. I unlocked, shoved Matt inside.

"Gil," she gave me the full treatment with those big eyes, "you're not going to listen to those recordings!"

"I am, yep."

"You haven't any right to . . ."

"Maybe not. All the same I'm going to."

She put the pleading hand on my sleeve. "You won't gain anything by it, nothing you don't know already."

"I'm sorry." I wasn't, actually. "But that's the way the ball bounces."

"I'd expected you to have more consideration —"

"Party who killed Santos didn't have much. I'm doing this for the kid," I said, "not for the enjoyment of scandal."

She went back into the Steventz suite.

It took a couple of minutes for me to get it through Matt's thick head that I wanted him to stand guard outside the door and not let anyone in while I was playing back the records. He'd thought he was going to be in on the recital; he was disappointed at being put to door watching. But he did as requested.

I had the playback machine warmed up and the broken spool of tape, which Steventz had ripped off, back on the apparatus when there was a commotion outside in the hall.

Blows, outcries, Nita smothering a scream.

I went to the door, flung it open. Matt practically fell into my arms; he was nursing a welt on the jaw. The welt had evidently been inflicted by the

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.45 automatic swung by Bill Steventz, — who proceeded to make me the target of that large, black muzzle.

Nita, behind him, cried: "Bill! *Don't!*"

Steventz prodded Matt aside. "Get away from that machine, Vine!"

I touched the Start switch, grabbed a chair.

"*Move!*" Steventz declared, "or you'll get hurt!"

I swung the chair up where I could balance it, jab with its good solid legs.

"I'll have company," I said.

Then Trevagno's seal-like barking filled the room:

"*You think I'm bluffing . . . I can't blame you for that . . . but I'm not bluffing. . . .*"

Steventz fired. The blast was deafening but the wiretapper's voice rode through it:

"*You understand that nothing I've managed to take down with my little contrivances is for sale. . . .*"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

STEVENTZ HAD SHOT at the playback machine, not at me. He missed the apparatus by a good two feet. The slug smashed a two-pound crystal ashtray to splinters of glass, ricocheted against the side of the typewriter and caromed across to the frame of an El Greco reproduction, shattering the top in a cascade of gilt slivers.

I had the chair balanced, was already jabbing the legs at Steventz but caught it just before it left my hands — because Matt had gone into action. The big ox might have been short on headwork but there was nothing wrong with his reflexes. He grappled with the Consolidator, bulling him back against the wall and pinning his shooting wrist so the automatic pointed first at me, then at Matt.

Nita slapped at the muzzle, crying: "Bill!. . . *Bill! Quit!!!*"

Trevagno's bark kept up its peculiar staccato:

"*. . . you have to understand my position . . . I've been engaged in a perfectly legitimate, perfectly lawful enterprise . . . my firm has been hired to uncover evidence of a criminal conspiracy . . . to forestall an attempt to deceive the stockholders of various corporations and induce them to vote their shares against their own interests and in favor of a group of individuals who intend to take over the stockholders' assets for their private beneFIT —*" The machine

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stuck, the tape squealed as if it had been taken by a fit of its own, was silent.

Matt growled. "Drop it. Or I'll break y' damn arm!"

Steventz dropped the gun.

I set the chair down. "Nice timing, Matt. Grab that popper, hang onto it."

Matt slammed the merger man back against the wall hard before he stooped to retrieve the gun. Steventz took a swing at him but failed to connect because Matt had ducked for the pistol.

Nita said: "*Behave now, Bill!* You might've killed someone!"

Bill Steventz grunted: "You've have deserved it if I'd nicked you, you bastard!" He glared at me with the sunlight-trapped-in-ice sparks very bright. "Put the lousy machine out of commission, anyhow!"

I fiddled with the recorder. The tape had caught where Steventz had ripped it out of the machine that morning. "Matt, if he tries to interfere again, flatten him."

"Strictly a pleasure." Matt swung the automatic like a nightstick.

Steventz snarled: "You play another inch of that tape, I'll sue your goddam hotel for every dollar it's worth! What's on that rat's records is my private property —"

"Since when," I interrupted, "have you had a vested interest in what a dead man had to say about you?"

Nita made a last appeal. "Can't you see you'll only make matters worse, Gil?"

"No," I told her. "This isn't a wire-tap. It's a record of what went on in this suite a little over twelve hours ago when Trevagno was shot to death. If it clears up the question of how he came to be shot, it'll make matters a whole lot better. I'm going to play it back, come hell or high water, but you don't have to listen to it. I didn't ask either you or Mister Steventz to hear it; you forced your way in here. You can go anytime."

Her eyes went inquiringly to Bill. He stalked to the divan, took her arm, pulled her down on the leather cushions beside him. "I want to be able to testify I heard him play it back. He's acting for the hotel; they'll be responsible in court for damages."

Ordinarily I handle a customer like that with kid gloves; a suit against a big hotel can be damaging even if the court decides in favor of the house. But this seemed to me to be one of the cases altered by exceptions.

"The suit might be on another pair of shoulders before we get through, Mister Steventz." I eased the torn edge of the tape past the guides; the seal-bark began again:

". . . *sometimes hear people say that innocent parties may be made to suffer by having their personal peccadilloes exposed by the methods my organization*

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is forced to use, but I've never found that to be true. We have no use for derogatory data of a personal nature which our delicate devices might turn up. Naturally we wouldn't turn over that sort of information to a businessman who might employ it to bring pressure of an unlawful nature against the individual whose secrets we have accidentally exposed. But we do sometimes caution such a person, who may have been careless about making incriminating remarks, against the dangers of exposure from others who may not be as scrupulous as Dossier Research Asso-o-o-o-o-" the tape squealed, stuck again.

Matt muttered: "Crises! It's like a radyo show, ain't it!"

Steventz whispered something to Nita. She clasped her left shoulder with her right hand; the skin paled where her fingernails dug in.

It was more trouble to get the tape back into the guides that time; one edge seemed to have curled over for a distance of a foot or so. But I got it running finally:

"*. . . but you seem to think I'm trying to bluff you into believing me when I tell you what I've recorded these last few days. Nothing of the sort. Just as a sporting gesture, why don't you call my bluff? Before you do, though, I think you ought to be fair enough to admit that I haven't threatened you in any way, shape or manner with exposure, haven't remotely suggested that you reimburse me for my efforts in cutting out of my reports all references to this . . . shall we call it a clandestine affair? Is that right. . . ?*"

There was a pause before Florence Steventz's reply came, faint and hesitant: "*That's right, you haven't, Mister Trevagno.*"

Nita's cry blurred the beginning of Trevagno's continuance:

"*Fair enough, Missus Steventz. Now you can easily call my bluff . . . I'll bet you this diamond ring against whatever cash you happen to have with you — you see I'm perfectly confident of the outcome or I wouldn't make a wager like that — that this spool I have here contains a record of a conversation which took place in the east master bedroom of the Zuloaga suite on the evening of — DON'T COME ANY CLOSER! — KEEP AWAY — I'LL USE THIS — GODDAMN YOU, I WILL —*"

"*Don't . . . think I'll . . . let you . . . get away . . . with —*" BANG!!!

The shot made everyone jump. It sounded as if it had come from the gun Matt was dangling at his side . . . but it had been on the record. I was startled enough to reach for the OFF switch, thinking the tape had broken.

But the surface noise kept right on; the moan of anguish from Florence was as realistic as if she was right there in the room.

She was.

Just inside the corridor door.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SHE CAME IN, closed the door behind her. "You can shut that damned thing off, Mister Vine. I'll tell you how it happened."

Bill sprang to his feet, flung an arm around her. "You don't have to say a thing, Flossie!"

Nita got up, caught hold of Mrs. Steventz's hand. "Let him think what he pleases!"

"No." Florence flopped wearily on the divan. "I *should* have spoken up when it happened. I'd better get it off my chest."

I switched the apparatus off.

Florence stared at it moodily. "I thought when that bullet hit him, his slimy mouth was shut *forever*. But I couldn't even trust the bastard after he was *dead*." She took the cigarette Bill handed her; if her hand trembled, I couldn't tell it.

"It began Wednesday morning," she took a long drag on the cigarette. "Oh . . . it began six months before that *really*, of course. When I was at Bar Harbor and Bill and Rick were racing all *over* the continent on the magnesium project."

Bill kept his arm tightly around her shoulders, leaned close against her on the divan. "For Christ's sake, you don't have to go into details."

"All right." She patted his knee gently. "What began up there on Mount Desert, — that came to an end down here . . . *some* time ago. But the hard way of the transgressor only took me over the edge of the cliff day before yesterday. When I came out of the suite on the way to the cabana, ran into that weasly wiretapper in the hall. Rather, he ran me down; he'd been waiting for me. I didn't even realize, then, that he was our next-door neighbor.

"He walked down the hall with me, telling me he had something I'd be interested in. Handed me a single sheet of paper. I nearly passed out — what was typed on that sheet I could have *sworn* only one person in the world knew and I was positive he wasn't anywhere *near* Palm Beach. Word for word it was what he and I'd howled at each other at the height of a bitter quarrel."

I thought the scowl stamped on Bill Steventz's face deepened; I was sure Nita was getting more apprehensive by the minute.

Florence went on: "I'd been desperately in love with the other man . . .

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or thought I was, for a little while. One of those damned things . . . the more I saw of the man, better I came to know him, less I liked him." She sighed. "When he got around to insisting I divorce Bill and marry him, I knew I'd never want to.

"So we quarreled, we kept *on* squabbling, — it became one of those ugly affairs . . . I was through with him but he was determined I shouldn't break things off. We fought like . . . *alleycats!* But I'd finally managed to convince him, in a nasty, name-calling quarrel, that we were washed up. And everything we'd said to each other was on that paper Trevagno handed me.

"I was knocked for an absolute loop. All I could *think* of, for the moment, was how to keep Bill from knowing about the affair. Because I knew, even before Trevagno mentioned money, that it was a pitch for blackmail. I honestly can't remember *just* how he worded it. He was jeopardizing his job by letting me know he had the recordings. Still he realized the spot I'd be in if he passed them along to the man who was hiring him. On the other hand it would be a very expensive business to doctor the tapes, cut out the parts which involved my private affair and dub in something to cover it up. But if I wanted him to go to that expense . . . something like that."

I asked: "What amount did he mention?"

"Twenty-five thousand," Florence said.

Good old Souk, I thought. Wouldn't have to split with Trevagno!

Bill said gruffly: "It wasn't that you couldn't lay hands on that much cash."

"Oh, no," she agreed. "If I'd *asked* you for it, I knew you'd have given it to me. But I knew that would only be the beginning. If he got away with it once, he'd try to shake me down forever after. I didn't sleep that night; I couldn't figure *any* way out of the muddle, either. Trevagno'd said I could get in touch with him anytime next day . . . that was yesterday . . . but I didn't make any attempt to.

"Last night I slugged myself with sleeping pills. I got some rest but no ideas as to how to cope with the creature. I'd gone to the cabana this morning to figure out an excuse to give Bill for needing that much money . . . when Bill brought over that sell-out note from Trevagno. It had been sent *to* Bill; there wasn't any mention of me. But I can smell a threat when it's shoved under my nose. I knew for sure then that *no* payment I could make would ever keep that weasel quiet. So I came here to settle it."

Florence rose abruptly, came over to the table. I got set to grab her if she made a swing at the recording apparatus but all she wanted was a drink. She took it — out of the bottle:

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"Ah . . . I needed that. Well, you heard the way he fixed it to make sure I couldn't accuse him of extortion. He asked me first if I'd come prepared to go along with his plan to help me. When I said I *had*, he must have started that machine; I didn't realize it at the time. But when he gave me that long spiel about not having used any pressure on me, I caught on . . . and lost my head.

"I'd been over there on the divan, where Nita is. I got up and went toward the machine, intending to bust it, if I could. He had the gun in the pocket of his terry robe. I dived for him the instant he started to yank it out of his pocket . . . and I mean *dived*. He yelled at me . . . you heard it . . . I got hold of his wrist. We wrestled around until his back was toward the divan . . . he'd wrenched his wrist free . . . and I slapped at the gun because I was terrified then, — I thought he meant to *kill* me. My hand hit the barrel, pushed it against his head. It went off." She closed her eyes. "You can believe it or not, as you wish, but when I saw him lying there dead, I went out like a *light*."

Bill said harshly: "Nobody can claim it was anything but an accident."

"That's my man." She went back to him, snuggled down beside him. "If you don't doubt me, Bill, I don't give a damn about the rest."

He showed the big yellow teeth. "I'd be a goddam poor excuse for a man if I let you down."

I spoke my piece. "Very heartwarming, far as it goes. Very human. I'm willing to string along with the accident version as far as Trevagno's concerned. I'm even willing to concede the man is probably better off dead than in prison for the rest of his days. But I don't give a hoot in hell about Trevagno. What about our bellhop, Santos?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"Nobody's going to shed any tears over a lousy Listening Tom but Santos was an all-righter. Because he was, I've a pretty fair idea what happened when he came up here to deliver a package a few minutes after Trevagno got his brains blown out. I can guess what he'd have done; it was what any good bellman would've done. He'd have seen Trevagno on the divan, Mrs. Steventz in a faint on the floor and he'd have made a jump to phone down for help. That's what any hotel employee would have done automatically, — think of the guest, — get first aid as fast as possible."

None of them uttered a peep.

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"But he didn't do that. Why? Something stopped him from using the phone," I said. "You'd come out of your coma — called to him. I'd have to guess at what you said but maybe we can do better than that." I switched the playback on.

The surface noise whispered as if the machine had respiratory trouble, that was all.

"Okay," I said to Florence, "You weren't lying on the floor then; you'd already recovered and found the OFF switch and cut the recording mike. Santos came in —" I held out a hand — "you want to take it from there?"

Bill took it. "Flossie went off the rails — she saw herself in court, in prison, in the chair — she rushed over to the dead man, snatched the pistol, tried to shoot herself. The kid thought she was gunning for him. He grabbed her so she missed."

Nita said: "That must've been the shot I heard, Gil."

I said, "Yeah. What's the rest of it, Mrs. Steventz? What'd you tell him to make him stampede?"

Florence put a fist to her mouth. "I told him that if he ever breathed a word about my being in this room I *would* kill myself, he'd have my death on his soul. I meant it, too; he *knew* I meant it. He promised . . . and ran."

"So now," I said, "the sandal's on the other foot.

"You mean I have his death on my conscience," Florence was horrified. "No, no . . . I do not!"

"Maybe your conscience has too much mileage on it, maybe it needs a retread." I was burned to a crisp.

Steventz came up off the couch. "Lay off, Vine. My wife's on the verge of a nervous —"

"Siddown," Matt waggled the automatic.

Steventz stayed on his feet. "You're not going to brow-beat Flossie — she's told you the whole truth —"

"Hah!" I jeered. "Not until she knew I'd heard this tape here. And it's taking a steam shovel to drag out of her what she thinks I don't know. I wish to God you people would stop acting as if a bellman's murder is something that you don't discuss in polite company. Santos ran out on us because he didn't want to be responsible for your doing the Dutch, Mrs. Steventz."

Her husband said: "Now, wait —"

I didn't. "But after Santy'd had time to cool off and think it over he realized the cops'd catch up with him sooner or later. I sent another bellman over to Santos's place to find him; maybe the kid heard about that, knew he was being hunted. Anyhow he was decent enough to call you up

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from that fishing camp, ask you what the hell he was to say when the cops did put the arm on him. That's the only way any of you could've known where he was."

Steventz was incensed: "We didn't know, goddamn it!"

Nita was outraged, too. "Why, you told that police officer it was Trevagno's partner who'd beaten your bellboy to death!"

"It wasn't Ken Souk's doing," I answered. "Wouldn't have made a particle of difference to Fat Boy whether Santos was dead or alive. He wasn't trying to collect on inside information about Trevagno's death; matter of fact, he was ready to chalk it up as suicide. What he was peddling was secrecy about the scandal . . . and Santos probably never knew there was any."

Nita was bewildered. "Oh!" She glanced quickly at Bill, quickly away.

"Party who drove out there to *Sans Souci*," I laid it right on the line, "overplayed his hand. He planted a diamond ring in Santos's Chevvy; ring'd been on Trevagno's finger. Maybe it'd been pulled off the corpse's hand, more likely Trevagno fancied himself as playing a part to the hilt and took the ring off as a gesture when he made that smoke screen bet with you, Mrs. Steventz."

Knuckles hammered on the corridor door.

"Open house tonight," Matt grumbled. "Do I let any more in, Gil?"

"See who it is," I told him.

There were three. Herrick Duffield. Pete Parry. And Charner Clarke, who looked as I've always thought of a king cobra looking when he's about to spit venom.

Herrick said: "They told me our flight permission had been cancelled, Bill. What's the holdup . . . inquest?"

Steventz jabbed a thumb at me. "Ask the emcee, it's his show." He held out his hand to Clarke. "When I told you at breakfast I hoped we could get together, I didn't have this in mind.

Clarke was caustic: "Seems we were both wrong, Mister Steventz. I thought I knew what you had in mind. I'd paid enough to find out. If I'd any notion it would terminate in this —" his gesture of disdains included me. "Lieutenant Parry has something to say to Mister Vine and suggested I come along to hear what it is, otherwise I shouldn't be here now, I assure you."

I said: "I don't know what the police department has to contribute but all I'm concerned about is clearing the good name of a bellman and sending his killer to hell in a handbasket."

Lieutenant Parry held up a bony finger. "Deputies think they've found that Pontiac."

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"Where?" I asked.

"Over near the Floridana Basin," the Lieutenant said. "Car was bought off a use car lot in West Palm Beach this afternoon." He cleared his throat noisily. "Bill of sale made out to a W. Stevens."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE ROOM wasn't quiet then; the heavy breathing was like the whisper of a southwest wind in the palm fronds. The inkblots in Parry's eyes were shiny as he surveyed all of them in turn.

Bill grunted: "Never owned a Pontiac in my life."

Florence said: "You never owned a second-hand car, either."

"The salesman," Parry scratched his broken nose, "who might identify the man who bought it has gone off on a wild turkey hunt; 'round here that means two, three days of carousin'."

Duffield spoke in an undertone to Nita. "What's the car? Why'd anybody use Bill's name, buying it?"

I told him. "Man who *drove* that car — not necessarily the one who bought it — is the butcher-boy who used the *Sans Souci* fish camp down near Lantana for a slaughter house tonight. Killed one of our bellmen. Put another man in the hospital with a fractured skull. And planted a diamond solitaire that was Trevagno's in the kid's Chevvy so it would look as if the kid stole it at the time of the shooting here. It didn't happen just that way, did it, Mrs. Steventz?"

She said: "What?" blankly.

"You took the ring," I said. "Right after you'd made Santos promise never to let anyone know you'd been in here and he tore out to get away so he could keep his promise, you picked up the ring off the rug where it must have fallen when Trevagno jerked out his gun. Correct me if I'm wrong; I'd say you associated the ring with that lopsided bet he'd pretended to be making with you; you thought if it was found here on the floor it would knock the suicide theory out . . . and you wanted it to look like suicide. So you snatched up the ring, ran out of the room and back to the cabana. It wasn't until after you'd had time to think about it that you realized you should have destroyed the tape, here."

She didn't correct me.

Parry was reproachful. "That boy might be alive right now if you'd told me all this twelve hours ago, Mister Vine."

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I explained that I hadn't known it then, hadn't guessed at it. "I'm still playing Twenty Questions. Here's one for Mrs. Steventz: you told your husband about the shooting and how stupid you'd been not to remove the tape from the machine?"

Steventz nodded. "She told me. And about Santos."

I said: "That's why you came in here in such a dither about the tapes . . . especially that one on the machine, sure. But she didn't mention that she'd taken the ring."

Florence cried: "I'd forgotten it. You don't suppose I meant to *steal* it! I've more damn jewelry than I care to wear, now."

"But," I said, "you remembered to tell the man who was most interested in keeping those tapes from being played."

Steventz glowered at me; I glowered right back. We locked stares like a couple of bull moose in mating season. "Your wife *didn't* tell you who she'd been playing footsie with, did she?"

"No, no, *no!*" Florence shrieked. "I did *not!*"

Bill Steventz said through his teeth: "She was afraid I'd do something I might regret. I might have, too. She was right."

"Then I'll tell you," I said.

Clarke murmured: "Wouldn't it be better if the lady's affairs were taken up in a judge's chambers, Lieutenant?"

I didn't give Parry time to answer. "I doubt it. The harm that's come out of this Listening Tom business has happened because all of you wanted to keep it hushed up. Trevagno died because Mrs. Steventz wanted to put the soft pedal on a triangle of private interest to herself and her husband. Santy Aliga was killed because the third side of that triangle decided that if the kid ever got in the back room of a police station, the whole Pandora's box would be opened and he'd be exposed. Hell, he exposed himself."

I made it blunt. "He found out from you where Santos had called from, Mrs. Steventz. He learned about the ring and got you to give it to him on some pretext of seeing it was returned to Trevagno's company or his partner. That's what makes me so sore; you've known right along who followed the kid out to the fish camp and killed him —"

"Oh, God, no!" Florence moaned. "I didn't even know he was dead until Nita told us a few minutes ago when we came back from the *Fancy Free;* I *didn't* know, so help me."

"All right," I conceded, "but you didn't point any finger then."

She burst into sobs, buried her face on Steventz's shoulder.

I went over, picked up the attaché case Matt had parked out of sight, by the credenza. "You were in such a hurry to fly back to New York you forgot your valuable evidence, Mister Duffield. Was that because you thought

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the magnets . . . or magnetic ores, lodestones or whatever the hell *is* in there . . . had done the work on the tapes I was supposed to be holding in my safe for the police?" I picked up the phone.

Duffield was shocked. "What in the hell are you driveling about!" He produced a key ring, found a small key. "Unless Trevagno'd been up to some of his sneaky tricks, all that's in that case are samples of ores from some of the Canadian properties under the control of Mister Clarke. I'll show you." He reached for the case.

"Let me have Connie," I said to Ethel.

Duffield got the catches unsnapped.

"Connie? Mister Vine. Did you get any word from the hospital? . . . What . . .?" I held the phone away from my ear so they could all hear him.

Connie was really putting out: "Doc rang back just five minutes ago to say that fish camp owner's come through in fine shape. They think he'll be able to make an identification in the morning, Mister Vine."

Steventz snarled: "*Rick, you bastard!*"

Duffield had the attaché case open. A Luger whipped out of it, snaked toward me.

Matt yelled: "*Look out, Gil!*"

Nita screamed.

I had the chair swinging up as a shield before Matt could get around to where he could aim at Duffield without hitting me.

Duffield never had a chance. But he took one.

I took one, too.

He crabbed sidewise toward the window, a short drop to the Fountain Court below.

I hurled the chair.

He tried to dodge: he did dodge one leg but another caught him where the rooster got the axe.

He dropped as if he'd been plugged with his own Luger.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE NYMPH-AND-SATYR clock over the Lanai Bar said it was ten past two — ten past closing time at the *Palms Plaza*. But at the little table in the corner near the tropical-fish aquarium, they were still serving. Just the two of us.

Nita looked fresh and smelled fresh — that clean northern lilac smell —

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but her eyes looked as if she'd just awakened from a terrible nightmare.

"How did you guess, Gil?"

"There was no blinding burst of revelation, Nita. It was piecework, snapshot of the truth here, flashbulb view of it there. Took me longer to put it together than it should have. Main part of the picture was Santos; I should have trusted my instincts about him. I was sure he wouldn't have run out to save himself, — only other thing was to save someone else."

"Florence." She nibbled at her *chateaubriand*. "You knew she wasn't afraid on Ricky's account. Or her own."

"Bill's. Sure. She thought he'd wind up in the chair for murdering Duffield if he learned who the man was. The first snapshot I got . . . and I didn't develop it very well, either . . . was when she came into El Greco while her husband was trying to appropriate those tapes. She was scared; she went, well, not pale as a sheet but as tan as *café au lait*. And she didn't want Bill to take that last spool, the one with Trevagno making the no-blackmail-just-a-sporting-bet attempt. He wanted it but she got him to leave it with me. I had to be dumb not to *think* things about Mrs. Steventz.

"Florence was afraid her husband would play those records back on another machine and find out . . . what? That's what I asked myself. And until Duffield broke up our twosome at lunch, I had no answer. But he was sore at you. Again, why? Only because he thought you'd been telling me something about him — or Mrs. Steventz — or possibly your boss.

"There was more. One, the stuff Trevagno'd been typing out was either a suicide note — or a quote from some quarrel. When I was sure it wasn't suicide, it had to be something he'd picked up on his bugs or his amplifiers from the Steventz suite. So if there was a sex angle, it was either secretary-and-boss or wife-and-assistant."

"You thought it was . . . the former, for a while?"

"I considered it," I said gravely. "You must admit you're pretty protective about your employer."

Nita was troubled. "He needs protecting, Gil. You know what he said to me just before he forced his way in the El Greco suite tonight?"

"That he was going to find out who his wife had been cheating with and kill him?"

"Not at all. He was being sorry for Florence and angry at himself for neglecting her. He said: 'I'll be goddamned if I'm going to let a younger man steal her, Nita. I'm no tin god; I made my mistakes before I married her. She made hers; she married a few of 'em. Just because she's made another doesn't mean I'm going to let her get away from me'."

"Good, old-fashioned male pride. Yes, well," I said, "we did save something out of that wreckage. He would've killed Duffield, if he'd found out

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a little sooner. I might have saved you all a little strain by tipping Parry off earlier, but I had to be sure I had been dead right. When the cop car came to the *Assembly Club* I was almost sure; you and Bill and his wife were the only ones who'd known I was going to be there . . . aside from Herrick Duffield. All of you were at the club when the police phoned to know if I was there . . . all except Duffield.

"However, things aren't all bad. Big Mac really has taken a turn for the better, Matt just brought me the word before I joined you here. He'll put the clinch nails to the case by identifying Duffield in the morning."

"Do you think he'll be . . . convicted, Gil?"

"I hope so," I said. "The man's not even an excuse for a human being. Planting that paste-diamond — Trevagno's ring was worth about twenty bucks — in Santos's car — then killing him to make it look like robbery-*cum*-murder upstairs . . . that puts him outside the pale."

"I suppose so, but what about Florence, after the child comes?"

"Duffield's?"

Nita nodded. "Bill knows about it. She told him. And Bill was marvelous. Nobody . . . except you and I and that beastly Souk pig . . . will have any idea it won't be Bill's baby. He's going to bring the baby up to consider him the father . . . so the child will never know about Ricky."

"I take it back . . . or what I left unsaid, which was that I hoped Duffield would fry in the chair first and hell, afterward," I said. "I'll settle for a life sentence."

Nita looked straight at me: "Gil . . . do you think that would be justice — all around?"

What could I say to that?

Now, I ask *you* . . .

THE END

If you've enjoyed Stewart Sterling's newest book as much as we suspect you have, you may very well want to have it in your library in a more permanent form. Lippincott will be publishing it in hard covers soon — in an expanded form. Watch for it at your bookstore.

Also, look for the next issue of Mercury Mystery Book-Magazine, on newsstands January 26th. It features a new, original novel, "The Savage Streets," by Floyd Miller. It is the story of Johnny Radin, a guy who thought he was a coward because he had walked out on every tough situation in his life — until an old man's death stampeded him into a search for a killer on New York's deadly, dangerous waterfront where one careless moment meant a knife in the back. In addition, the next exciting issue will feature true crime stories by Edgar Lustgarten, Edward D. Radin, Jim Thompson, and others.

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MYSTERY PUZZLE: Death by Strangulation

THE LYMAN APARTMENT WAS SLEEK, modern, and impersonal. Except for Mrs. Lyman, that is. Someone had got quite personal with her — had strangled her with a stocking. She was in her nightgown on the floor of the bedroom, and she had been dead since 10 the previous night.

After examining the room, Inspector Goldsmith returned to the living room with Sergeant Jackson.

"Mr. Lyman has been in Florida for the past week," the Sergeant reported. "He's expected back North this morning. At least that's what the housekeeper, Mrs. Wilson, tells me." The Sergeant nodded at the small middle-aged woman sitting stiffly on the edge of one of the streamlined chairs. "She says she went home at 8:30 last night."

"May God forgive me," Mrs. Wilson said. "I left the poor lady in anger. She was a good woman, but I thought she had no right to sell off all Mr. Lyman's wonderful old furniture yesterday and put in all this — this junk! And I told her so. 'But it will be such a delicious surprise for him,' she said, and I told her it would be a surprise — but if it was delicious I'd eat it."

"The furniture is all new, then?" the Inspector asked.

"Every stick," Mrs. Wilson said emphatically. "The master's beautiful old cherry table went for that *thing*." She nodded at a creation of glass and pipestem legs. "And the lovely grandfather clock that used to be by the fireplace — maybe it didn't keep perfect time, but that heathen isn't fit for a decent house."

The Inspector walked over to look at what he'd thought was a simple statuette in the corner. Close examination revealed that the African warrior's stomach was actually an intricate clock face.

A key turned in the front-door lock, and a large pale man carrying a new pigskin suitcase entered.

It proved to be Mr. Lyman. "What's happened?" he asked urgently. "Where's my wife? The doorman told me there'd been an accident."

Inspector Goldsmith had a sudden hunch. "Mr. Lyman, you look quite pale for a man who has spent a week in Florida. Haven't you really been in, say, Chicago?"

"Why, I . . ." Lyman sputtered.

Inspector Goldsmith took hold of Lyman's wrist, turned it so he could see the man's watch. "If you haven't been in Chicago, why is your watch an hour slow?" he asked.

"What do you mean? Look at the clock there! That's the right time. Certainly I've been in Florida."

"You may have been," the Inspector said grimly. "But now I don't think you were last night."

Why did the Inspector doubt Lyman had been in Florida the previous night?
Solution on page 128.

— J. A. KRIPPER

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DOCTORS IN CRIME

Veronica Parker Johns' insight into human character is evident in her fine mystery novels. Now she uses the same rare perception to give us a picture of the Sheppard tragedy. No dry newspaper account, this — but a flesh and blood story which we think reveals more fully than ever before the atmosphere surrounding Mrs. Sheppard's death and its bearing on the guilt of Dr. Sam. Miss Johns also poses some highly intriguing questions . . .

THE BUSHY-HAIRED STRANGER

by Veronica Parker Johns

UNTIL THE MORNING OF JULY 4, 1954, few parents in the nation would not have envied the senior Sheppards of Bay Village, Ohio. Theirs was a closely knit family. The three sons had not gone in search of careers but preferred to add honor to their name in the hospital founded by their father. This filial devotion was shared by their wives, who were like daughters to their in-laws.

On the night of July 2 the clan assembled for one of its frequent get-togethers, unaware that this would be the last. The topic most joyously discussed by all present was an impending increase in the tribe. Samuel, the youngest, and his wife, Marilyn, were expecting their second child around Christmas time.

The baby was never born. Some time after midnight of the following day, Marilyn was murdered. Before New Year's, Sam was sentenced to life imprisonment in the Ohio State Penitentiary for a crime which the family steadfastly maintains he could never have committed.

The remaining members of the family, that is. Father and Mother Sheppard have died within the year, she by her own hand. Their funerals, which he attended under guard, afforded Sam the last glimpses of the outside world he will have for many a day.

He must ardently wish that the clock could be turned back to one minute to midnight, July 3.

The known events before that final reunion carried no hint of coming disaster. Sam and Marilyn had been sweethearts since their school days. The inevitable separation that occurred when he went away to

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study osteopathy, seemed as tragic an event as they would ever know. Marilyn spent two lonely years at Skidmore College. Their constant, cross-country correspondence pledged unending devotion.

Their wedding in 1945 was the social event of the season.

Two years later a son, Samuel Jr., was born. Some called him little Sam. Others, finding him a tin-type of his father, nicknamed him Chip, short for chip-off-the-old-block.

In 1951, upon completion of intensive study, Sam took his place beside his father and brothers in Bay View Hospital. Family-owned, the two-hundred-bed institution had an excellent reputation which was further enhanced by Sam's brilliant performances in neurosurgery.

He and Marilyn bought a $31,500 home of their own on the shore of Lake Erie. Within two and a half years they had paid off the mortgage and it was theirs, free and clear. They owned a Lincoln Continental, a jeep and — Sam's special pride — a Jaguar. He was co-owner of an aluminum boat with his friend J. Spencer Houk, mayor of the village who ran a local butcher shop in his non-municipal moments. Spence Houk was the first person known to speak to Sam after the murder and was later to figure prominently in the trial as a witness for the prosecution.

Sam's possessions and his hobbies, which included sports car races, golf and water-skiing, might make him appear to be somewhat of a playboy. The facts, however, do not bear out this assumption. His record at the hospital indicates a conscientious young man who rated his work and patients above all else. The Sam Sheppards seem to have been that ideal young couple at whom the ads in slick magazines are directed. They budgeted their time and money to provide the good life for themselves, with no false show or ostentation.

Such, indeed, would have been out of place in Bay Village. Dry by local option, it is a neighborly community of neatly painted houses, well-tended lawns, well-attended churches. Marilyn taught Sunday School at the Methodist Church. She also found time to coach a girls' basketball team, despite the fact that she ran her home single-handedly save for the services of an occasional maid.

This maid-by-the-day provided a footnote at the trial. In March of 1954 Sam and Marilyn traveled to California, she to visit friends up North, he to attend to alumni duties in the Los Angeles area. Much was to be testified about that trip. The maid's contribution was to the effect that the routine of her chores had been slightly altered upon their return. Whereas the Sheppards had hitherto shared the master bedroom, there were now two rooms to be tidied.

The Doctor had a cold, she was

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informed by way of explanation for the change. If she had any mental reservations, if she suspected that the honeymoon was over, she was one of very few persons in Bay Village to whom the thought occurred.

On Friday, the third of July, the Sheppards enjoyed a picnic lunch with their friends and contemporaries, the Don C. Aherns. Afterwards, they repaired to Sam's and Marilyn's for supper. No wild orgy. To paraphrase Oscar Hammerstein, the evening was as corny as the blueberry pie Marilyn had baked for dessert.

After little Chip had been put to bed the two couples watched television, the final program being a movie titled, with terrifying aptness, "Strange Holiday." Of ancient vintage, it bored Sam. Yielding to the lassitude induced by the day's outdoor activities, he stretched out on a sofa and promptly went to sleep.

The Aherns lingered on to see the end of the film. Some time after 12 their hostess could no longer conceal her yawns. She may have made the customary protest about its being due to the lateness of the hour, not the company. The company, however, chose to depart.

As they went they looked at Sam. Wearing a corduroy jacket over his T-shirt he was sleeping peacefully as a baby. They did not waken him to say good night. They said it to Marilyn, and left.

Except for the person, or persons, who killed her, they were the last to see her alive.

At 5:50 the next morning Mayor Houk was awakened by the jangle of his telephone. A frantic Sam Sheppard was on the other end of the wire.

"For God's sake, Spence," he said, "get over here quick. I think they've killed Marilyn."

Mrs. Houk, also aroused by the phone, was told the shocking news. They dressed hastily and rushed to the Sheppard house, but three doors away from their own. Sam, stripped to the waist, his face bruised, was a sorry sight when they arrived, but an even more gruesome one waited upstairs in the bedroom.

Mrs. Houk is a motherly woman; her first thought was for the son of the household. She found him sleeping, mercifully. Then she tiptoed back to the master bedroom, the horror of which she had glimpsed out of the corner of an eye on her way to Chip.

"There was so much blood," she said afterward, "it didn't look real."

Blood on Marilyn who lay upon the bed, her pyjamas torn, her blonde head so battered by a shower of blows that, as her brother-in-law Stephen said later, it was impossible to recognize her except in profile. Blood all over the walls save for one spotless region, a corner near the foot of the bed. Mrs. Houk tarried no longer than was necessary. She shut the door firmly behind her in

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order that Chip, soon to be carried to a more wholesome atmosphere, would be spared the horror she could never forget.

The Mayor summoned the proper authorities and contacted Sam's brothers, Stephen and Richard. The latter, according to Houk, evinced a surprising reaction to the crime. Spencer Houk testified under oath that Richard, after viewing the murder victim, rushed downstairs into the den and shouted.

"Did you do this, Sam, or did you have anything to do with it?"

This remark, corroborated by no other witness, was at variance with the solid phalanx of belief in Sam's innocence which the family presented at all other times. Perhaps it never was uttered verbatim, and with the inflection later read into it. Everything was at sixes and sevens that morning, and a margin for error must be allowed.

Houk, himself, had not at that time entertained the possibility of his friend's guilt. He did not order an arrest, which would have been within his province. "I figured," he said later, "that Sam couldn't have done it." Much time passed before he would believe his neighbor's involvement.

When Dr. Stephen arrived to find his youngest brother prone upon the floor he thought he had misunderstood the telephoned message summoning him to the scene, that Sam as well as Marilyn had met death at the hands of persons unknown. Until Sam stirred beneath Stephen's touch upon his shoulder, the elder believed this to be a double tragedy.

Sam, though alive, had not come unscathed through the night. Murmuring incoherently he appeared to be suffering from shock. It was suspected that his neck might be broken. No one questioned the brothers' recommendation that he be taken to their hospital for treatment and X-rays. At the time his status was that of a bystander injured during the commission of a crime; medical attention at the earliest possible moment was indicated.

The one lucid remark he made on the way to Bay View was, "My God — Marilyn's dead!" as though the enormity of the night's events had just come through to him.

Throughout the day his story emerged as he was questioned by the Bay Village police, the detectives summoned from Cleveland, and the coroner, Dr. Samuel R. Gerber. It was a story foggy as to details, but one to which he hewed steadfastly, from which he never swerved during the interminable weeks of the trial.

He had been awakened at some time before dawn by a cry, "heard or sensed," from Marilyn. He had rushed upstairs to her room. In the dim glow cast by a night-light in the adjoining dressing room he saw a vague form standing by her bed. The form was topped by a white blob, presumably a light-colored

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shirt; the rest blended into the darkness. At the precise moment of sighting it, Sam said, he was "clobbered" from behind.

He blacked out momentarily, recovering in time to hear someone running down the stairs. In spite of intense pain he followed, catching up with his quarry at the foot of the steps leading to the beach. There, by the lake, the two grappled. Sam was bested. This time he completely lost consciousness.

When he came to, it was dawn. He was lying partially in the water, his head toward shore, but whether he had fallen there or been dragged by an adversary intent upon drowning him he could not remember.

As he lay there, in his muddied recollections one event was crystal clear: Marilyn had been hurt. Of this he had been aware in that brief instant in the bedroom. Agonizingly, he dragged himself to his feet and went to check the extent of her injuries, to help her if needed.

It seemed obvious that she was beyond help. However, the wish being father to the thought, he bent over her shattered body to feel for a pulse in her neck, the faintest flicker of life which might be fanned into a flame.

She was dead. Added to the accumulation of horror must have been the inkling that she might have been alive when last he was in this room. With his professional skill, might he have saved her if he had not chosen to chase the prowler?

Emotionally and physically exhausted he called on his last reserve of strength to set the wheels of justice in motion. Logically, he phoned his friend, the mayor, who would know the procedure to be followed in such cases. Besides, he was near at hand and could arrive in a matter of minutes. Sam must deeply have craved human companionship in that dark hour.

"For God's sake, Spence," he said into the telephone, "get over here quick. I think they've killed Marilyn."

The words etched themselves into Spencer Houk's brain. He was certain that the plural pronoun had been used. Sam, himself, was never sure whether one or two unwelcome visitors had been in his home that night. The mere fact that he had observed a white-topped figure before him simultaneously with being struck from behind proved nothing.

Sam knew the dimensions of that room. He knew that a man with arms of average length could stand at the foot of Marilyn's bed and be within reaching distance of anyone crossing the threshold. In the dim light the lunge forward would not necessarily have been observed and intercepted.

Whatever the number of intruders, Sam was able to describe but one, and that one sketchily. The stranger was "wild-eyed." He was "bushy-haired." It went without saying that he was powerfully built,

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the blows he had inflicted upon Marilyn not being the work of a weakling.

A witness at the trial testified that he and his wife, homeward bound from a late motion picture show, had caught just such an apparition in the glare of their headlights in the vicinity of the Sheppard home. But no one else came forward to say he had seen him. To many it seemed strange that so outlandish a figure could have passed unnoticed through a community like Bay Village, singling out Sam's house only, committing no other vandalism or worse, then vanishing into the wisps of morning never again to be seen.

In the morning, it is doubtful if he bore marks of his scuffle with Sam. Sam's knuckles showed no evidence of any of his defensive punches having landed. He had a black eye, plus several cuts about his mouth. What he had guessed to be a broken neck was anticlimactically diagnosed as a possible spine injury, although he persisted in wearing a corrective leather collar for some time.

If Sam was telling the truth it would have been better for him had the stranger been a bit rougher. More scars would have lent an air of verisimilitude to his story. As it was, people wondered why a powerful maniac capable of raining a multitude of blows on Marilyn should make so few marks on Sam during their two encounters.

It was especially odd when you considered that the slayer had an unconscious Sam at his disposal *and* that he still had the weapon used on Marilyn. He must have been carrying the weapon away with him, for it has never been found.

These conjectures, added to a few other oddities, caused a Cleveland detective to remark to Sam, "You are Suspect Number One." On July 30 Dr. Sam was arrested.

Let us turn to the scene of the crime on the morning of July 4. Cleveland detectives subsequently complained that too many people did just that, that too little effort was made by the Bay Village police to curb the horde of sightseers who swarmed over the place, obliterating such spoor as an intruder might have left. The morbidly curious, however, could not be blamed for the fact that the sill across which the prowler was said to have entered bore not a footprint in its undisturbed dust.

Maybe he came in through the back door, crossing the sun-yellow kitchen, and climbed the stairs to the second floor. But, if he was a burglar, why did he go upstairs immediately, running the danger of waking sleeping occupants? Would it not have been more efficient to case the ground floor first, to estimate if the loot were worth the effort? And this he did not do, or Sam would have awakened.

Perhaps he was a thief with quirks, who ruthlessly preferred to slay his victims as they slept so he

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might rob at his leisure, without fear of interruption. Then, why on earth didn't he carry an orthodox weapon with him instead of this gadgetty, undetermined thing that he used? A blackjack, a knife, a gun would have been more reliable.

Was he under the misapprehension that the house-owners were not at home? He'd have to be pretty stupid to think that. The house on the lake is the sort of place owners go *to*, not *from*, on holiday weekends.

So, why deliberately walk into the master bedroom and announce his arrival?

There is another possible hypothesis, based upon the fact that Sam is an inordinately heavy sleeper. The next morning police found signs of the most ineptly executed robbery in the annals of crime. A desk drawer was open, but the money plainly visible inside it had not been removed. A phial had been taken from Sam's little black bag. This was later recovered outside the house, as was a random collection of swag including Sam's wrist watch, apparently dropped by the robber in his haste to get away.

Perhaps the man gathered these things before he became aware that the Sheppard family was sleeping on two levels that night. When he saw Sam on the living room couch he changed his plan and went upstairs and murdered Marilyn.

But why murder Marilyn? Why not Sam, if he saw him first? In which case, Sam might have been the only victim. Marilyn would have heard the disturbance and used the telephone beside her bed — not, incidentally, used by Sam to report her death — to summon help.

Did he take the loot upstairs with him? Did he cache it somewhere before he went? And how come there was dried blood on Sam's watch when it was found, indicating that it was taken after the killing, presumably during one of Sam's blackouts? And why, after clinging to it tenaciously throughout the murder and both scuffles, should he drop it in the woods where nothing threatened?

On the other hand, if the murderer went directly to the bedroom he was most likely unaware that Sam was below. The living room is L-shaped, and Sam's couch was not in the line of vision from the stairway.

Sam's talent for sleeping must have been passed on to his son. Little Chip, sleeping in the next room, did not hear strange footsteps approach his mother's bed. The dog, Koko, did not sense an alien presence and bark in alarm. Ultimately, Sam "heard or sensed" a cry from Marilyn and dashed to her aid.

Detectives timed it. It takes six seconds to get from the place where he was sleeping to the master bedroom, if you are hurrying as Sam would have been under the circumstances. To strike Marilyn 30 odd times would have required a minimum of 40 seconds. So, during 34 seconds of her agony her husband slept on.

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Something upon the couch struck the officials as peculiar. Sam's jacket, neatly folded, had been placed at the foot. If his night had been the nightmare he described, there was no time throughout its passage when he might have removed his jacket and stowed it so carefully.

Moreover, the white T-shirt which the Aherns said he was wearing under it had completely disappeared.

Nobody took the robbery angle very seriously. The evidence of it was tacitly regarded as a somewhat pathetic attempt to substantiate the bushy-haired stranger who, if he existed, had thoughtlessly neglected to leave his calling card. That a maniac, loose in the countryside, could murder pointlessly was probable. That he would also steal trifles and let them slip through his butter-fingers put too great a strain upon credence.

Furthermore, it was wholly beyond belief that such a character would have been possessed of a passion for neatness. The state of Ohio maintained that a trail of blood leading from Marilyn's bedside down the stairs to a basement sink had been recently washed away. The defense parried that these were ancient stains made by Koko, the female Irish setter, which had previously been scoured in the ordinary course of good housekeeping.

As is frequently the case in protracted trials, despite or because of various expert testimony, there was never a direct yes or no to that question. But, all in all, there were enough questions around to make things look very bad for Sam.

Toward the end of August he was briefly released under $50,000 bail. He left his cell, where he had passed the time alternately reading sports car magazines and the Bible, and went to his father's home. The very next night the police came to get him again, after the grand jury had indicted him for murder.

Sam's private life was gone over with a fine-toothed comb. Among the bits held up for public inspection was the fact that his and Marilyn's marriage had not been the heaven it seemed to be.

It came as no surprise that Sam had conducted a few flirtations with his women patients. Handholding is considered an integral part of the bedside manner of handsome young medics. Any doctor's wife worth her salt should condone, if not encourage, such peccadilloes. It developed, however, that in Sam's case things had gone a bit further.

Sam had tugged at the leash. A young housewife, at the trial, broke her promise to her murdered friend, divulging what Marilyn had told her in confidence: Sam wanted out. He had gone so far as to discuss the possibility of a divorce with his father. Parental opposition had momentarily quashed the project but it remained as a cloud in the heavenly blue.

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There was, it developed, a specific girl who stood out among the Other Women. She was Susan Hayes, pretty, well-mannered, a technician whose affair with Sam had blossomed during overtime hours in the laboratory, had flowered during the aforementioned trip to California.

While Marilyn sojourned in the north, Sam had shared a friend's guest room with Susan. He had given her a wristwatch, to replace one she had lost, she said.

The dignity and candor of this thirty-first witness favorably impressed the murder jury. Sam had spoken to her of divorce, she asserted, but had never dangled before her the prospect that she would be his second bride. She hadn't counted on it, nor made any earnest effort to break up his home.

She quoted him as saying that he loved his wife very much "although not so much as a wife." This would seem to indicate that he had resigned himself to the *status quo*, that he was content to dwell cosily behind the façade of a working marriage while he amused himself on the side. Told in her matter-of-fact tones, it did not suggest a passion so volcanic as to erupt in murder.

Susan's 76-minute ordeal on the witness stand was one of the few high spots in a trial which, for all of its elements of sensationalism, was surprisingly uneventful. Much time was given over to technical detail, to interminable haggling between the defense and prosecution.

It droned on for two months. There were no startling developments, no surprise witnesses, none of those tingling courtroom-dramatic moments when a mask is dropped and truth briefly shines in all its purity or evil flashes like lightning. The brilliant reporters and specialists assembled for a spectacle never once scrambled for the doors, tripping each other up in a race for the telephones in the good old "Front Page" fashion.

Through it all Sam sat, mostly staring at his hands as though he wondered how anyone could believe these slim surgeon's fingers capable of murder. Sometimes he doodled, or passed notes to his counsel. Often he smiled reassuringly at his family. On the day that horrendous full-color pictures of Marilyn's corpse were flashed upon a screen, Sam sat behind it to spare himself the sight.

At the height of the season of good will toward men, twelve good and true men and women retired to consider his case. They deliberated for 102 hours, returning to announce a verdict of guilty, in the second degree. It was later said that they had never for a minute doubted that guilt, had argued merely over the extent of it.

Everything at the end remained precisely as it was at the beginning when the Grand Jury had indicted him. No effective voice had been raised in his support.

Perhaps that was because the only voice which might have spoken in

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his behalf was forever stilled. The missing witness was, of course, Marilyn Sheppard. If for some valid reason a murderer would enter that house to kill only her, to let her husband off lightly, completely to ignore the child, who but she would best know that reason?

Marilyn emerged as a person wholly without enemies, but how can one be sure amid present day complexities? A slight, even an imagined one, might cause a deranged personality to gain revenge in just such a brutal manner.

She was a girl who seemed to have everything, a happy home, a doting husband, an adored son, just the type to inspire envy in those less fortunate. A type, on the other hand, capable of being admired by the children in her Sunday school class, the girls in the basketball team, to the point of reverence.

If one of these young people sought, and followed, Marilyn's advice on a personal matter, might it not be possible that someone's sick ego was bruised, that a bushy-haired stranger went out of his way to end such interference forever?

Marilyn might have added much to the body of the evidence, but Marilyn was mute. Sam was convicted, and subsequently sentenced to life in prison.

At the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus, Sam is a model prisoner. If he keeps on this way, he may be paroled in ten years. But the world to which he returns will bear merely coincidental resemblance to that which he left.

His little boy will be a youth of eighteen. He now lives with the Stephen Sheppards, although an aunt of his mother's, Mrs. Henrietta Munn, is making a fight for legal custody. Another aunt of Marilyn's, Mrs. Gulford Brown, has sided with Sam all along, still believing him innocent and a suitable father for Chip. Until his release, she is satisfied to have the boy remain a Sheppard.

The house on Lake Road has recently been sold, to keep or reveal its secret to new owners. Bay Village would rather forget the unpleasantness entirely, now that it has returned to its placid routine.

The last door of hope was slammed in Sam's face this past Spring, when his lawyer, William J. Corrigan, sought to have the case reopened. Corrigan, a former newspaperman, hired Professor Paul Leland Kirk, renowned criminologist, to survey the evidence.

Dr. Kirk, of the faculty of the University of California, made no commitments in advance, ethically stating that his findings would be announced whether they were to Sam's benefit or detriment. Corrigan was willing to take the chance, in itself an endorsement of faith in his client.

Dr. Kirk covered the ground exhaustively, both in the murder house, where he stayed overnight,

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and in his laboratory, where he meticulously rechecked every item of physical evidence plus a couple which he had himself discovered.

His conclusion as to the prosecution's findings and exhibits was that, "Careful appraisal . . . shows it to be completely worthless as proof of the guilt — or innocence — of the defendant."

One of the additional clues he found was a cigarette butt in the upstairs bathroom of a brand which none of the frequenters of the household smoked. Another, isolated from the material removed from beneath Marilyn's nails, was a scrap of nail polish differing from the kind she used. Neither of these items jibed very neatly with Sam's tale of a bushy-haired stranger, but Dr. Kirk maintained that they should open up new territory.

On the floor beneath the bed he also found a fragment of tooth which could have been Marilyn's. He theorized that it had broken off when, in a struggle for her life, she bit her assailant. No scar of such a bite was visible on Sam Sheppard.

Re-enactment of the crime in its proper setting, under identical lighting conditions, convinced him that Sam's narrative could have been true, that a man standing at the foot of the bed could have reached out and hit Sheppard as he stood in the doorway. It also led him to insist that the murderer was not right-handed, as Sam is known to be.

As has been mentioned, one corner of the room was free of the blood stains which had daubed everything else. On the wall above the head of the bed was a bloody imprint which, though blurred, had always been conceded to be the spot where a man, leaning forward, had rested his weight on one hand while he wielded the death-dealing blows with the other. Dr. Kirk demonstrated that the murderer, leaning in such a way, masking the wall behind him with his own torso, must certainly have been left-handed.

There was a smear of blood above the knee of the slacks Sam had worn that night. Dr. Kirk was able to match it to a water-diluted smear on the mattress. Sam had sworn that after he came to on the beach he had gone to his wife's bedside and bent over her to feel for a pulse. The professor reasoned that blood upon the bed might have transferred itself to Sam's wet trousers, being itself slightly diluted in the process, at exactly that point. Again, Sam need not necessarily have been lying.

Nevertheless, the state ruled the additional evidence inadmissible and refused to order a re-trial. The very thoroughness with which Sam's lawyers have pursued the case to this point makes the possibility of further petitions improbable.

Sam will have time, at least a decade, in which to plan ways to exonerate himself, to dredge from his unconscious further illuminating memories of that frightful night. He is now said to believe that his an-

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tagonist, Marilyn's murderer, was someone they knew, that this suspicion had crossed his mind during the fight, had been dismissed, then temporarily forgotten in the overwhelming horror. The notion has returned, and he is now sure that he was right in the first place. He has revealed the name of this suspect to his brothers.

Meanwhile, the rest of us are left to wonder.

CURIOUS CLUES

by Paul Steiner

A burglar in Farge, Germany, smashed a glass window to break into a store and the tip of his nose was cut off. Police carefully preserved it in alcohol. When a man without a nose tip was located, they matched the pickled one to him. No alibi could save him.

The man who hitched a ride with Sheriff Tom Owen in Mangum, Okla. turned out to be just the person Owen was looking for on a bad check charge.

British police traced a man who drank 21 bottles of beer after breaking into a Cornish inn by toothmarks on the caps. He had opened the bottles with his teeth.

Memphis police caught an automobile thief when they spotted him driving about town alone with a "Just Married" sign on the car's rear bumper.

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If young and beautiful Minnie Tucker had been unfaithful to her husband, you could hardly blame her. Felix Tucker, after all, had been a cruel man. But the fact that he beat his wife was not conclusive evidence that he might also have killed her. Besides, there were two other men in Minnie's life . . .

THE AIR-TIGHT ALIBI

by Craig Rice

WHEN BEAUTIFUL, YOUNG MINNIE Margaret Tucker finished her washing that May morning in 1942 and poured out the water over the side of the porch, she did not know that she had just set the trap that would catch her murderer.

What happened during the rest of that day came out only bit by bit, but at 6:10 P.M., in her apartment on Trinity Lane, in a suburb five miles from Nashville, Minnie lay dead on the bedroom floor with a knife in her back.

Police, called to the scene by a stricken and nearly hysterical husband, found Minnie lying near the bed, clutching in her hand a pink knitted baby cap. She was fully clad, wearing a heavy topcoat over her clothes, as if she had been on the point of leaving the house. The weapon, a butcher knife, was deeply imbedded in the body. Nearby stood a packed suitcase and a bundle of baby clothes. By the wall was a crib, where Minnie's eleven-months-old baby still lay fast asleep.

Felix Tucker, the husband, told his story in hoarse, halting whispers.

He had come home about ten minutes after six from Central High School where he was attending sheet metal classes. He had called out to his wife and when there was no answer, he had entered the bedroom and found her dead on the floor. Then, running out of the house to a neighbor's he cried out: "Get the police! My wife — she's been murdered!"

He had last seen his wife alive, Felix said, when he left the apartment early that morning.

"She seemed just like always. Nobody had anything against Minnie."

That is always and everywhere the first story that husbands, or wives, tell when a murder has been committed. Everything was just fine and dandy, nobody had any enemies, and it is simply impossible that a thing like this should have happened. If the police stopped here in their questioning no murder case would ever be solved. So in this case, as in other

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cases, the officer who was doing the questioning had to suppress his natural sympathies and press the husband for further information. Hadn't Mrs. Tucker quarrelled with someone recently?

"Well," the young husband admitted, reluctantly, "she did have a falling out with a certain party. But that was several weeks ago, and they haven't seen each other since."

And who was that "certain party"?

"Charley Brenner. But he wouldn't do a thing like this. He — he was in love with her."

Now this is a major rule in Ye Compleat Manual of Crime Detection. The next of kin is always sure that so-and-so could not have done it, because he was his, or her, best friend. Experience has shown, however, that the killer is rarely, if ever, a disinterested stranger to the deceased. People are not murdered by strangers. They are murdered by their friends. And often by their best friend.

Persistent questioning brought out more:

"Minnie and I were separated a while back, and came together again just a few weeks ago. While we were living apart, Charley Brenner kept pestering Minnie to divorce me and to marry him."

An officer stepped into the room. He had been questioning the neighbors, and one of them told of having seen a man hurry out of the apartment and drive off at high speed about forty minutes before Tucker arrived home. The neighbor had recognized the man. He was a fellow named Charles Brenner, a salesman.

A call was immediately broadcast to pick up Charles Brenner, salesman for a local furniture company. Meanwhile, the police continued with their questioning of Tucker, and their examination of the house and its vicinity.

He had left school that day at 4:20, Tucker told the police. From there he had gone to a shoe store on Dickerson Road. It was then 5:35. He talked with the manager of the shoe store till six o'clock. Then he went home, arriving there at 6:10 P.M. The police knew everything after that.

In looking over the house, the police stepped out on the back porch, and noticed that a footpath led across a vacant lot in the direction of Dickerson Road. And now their flashlights picked out a man's footprint near the back porch. It pointed away from the house, toward the vacant lot. Just that one footprint, in the moist ground where Minnie Tucker had poured the water from her washing that morning. Everywhere else the ground was hard and dry, too hard to show any print. If this was the killer's footprint, then Minnie Tucker had unwittingly trapped her own murderer.

Was it Charles Brenner, the furniture salesman who had pestered her to divorce her estranged husband

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and marry him? It could have been, if Tucker's story was true.

But now another figure entered the case. Two neighbors told of having seen a tall, heavily built youth leaving the Tucker apartment at about five o'clock, nearly half an hour before Brenner was reported to have been seen leaving the premises. According to these informants, the tall young man had left hurriedly, from the front door, cutting across the vacant lot in the rear, and glancing back as he went.

There were now two suspects. One, the tall young man, had been seen leaving the apartment around five o'clock. Brenner, arriving there shortly before 5:20 might have seen Minnie Tucker lying dead in the bedroom and left hastily for fear of being implicated in her death. Fifty minutes later Felix Tucker came home. Any one of the three men might have committed the murder, of course, but so far Tucker was in the clear, the police having checked his alibi and found it air-tight.

At this point, persistent questioning once more produced results. The Police Chief himself, interrogating the neighbors who had seen the tall, husky young man, learned that the youth had been a frequent visitor at the Tucker apartment, although they could not remember his name. On one occasion this same young man had been overheard saying something about "getting Felix Tucker."

This was exciting but slim information to go on, but an hour later detectives detailed to the job found the young man in question. He admitted calling at the Tucker apartment that afternoon, but —

"Minnie was alive and well when I left," he insisted. "She said she was tired from doing a big washing. I wouldn't have stopped there at all, but Mother asked me to drop by and see how Minnie and the baby were getting along."

The youth's mother supported his story.

Meanwhile, the officers who had been detailed to find Charles Brenner had a stroke of luck. They had come upon a witness who told of seeing Brenner enter a gas station at 6:30 P.M. and ask for an Alabama road map.

Charles Brenner was picked up in short order, on the outskirts of Athens, Alabama. He agreed to waive extradition and was returned to Nashville for questioning.

"Yes," he replied when confronted with the neighbor's story, "I stopped in to see Minnie about 5:20, but I certainly don't know anything about who killed her. She was going to visit her folks for a few days."

Asked why he left town so hurriedly, Brenner was not so communicative. Just decided to run down to Birmingham on business, he told the police, but, reminded that he was the No. 1 suspect in a brutal murder, and that he was reported to have been in love with

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Minnie, Brenner became vehement.

"I didn't do it!" he protested. "I admit I loved her, but that's no crime. And I wanted her to leave her husband. But I didn't kill her. Honestly, I didn't!"

To add further gloom to the case the Bureau of Investigation now came through with a discouraging report. None of the fingerprints on the murder weapon was clear enough for classification. And all the fingerprints in the Tucker apartment belonged to the Tuckers.

There was still the task of tracing the murder weapon, however, and to this the officers now addressed themselves. To their surprise it turned out to be Tucker's. He readily admitted ownership, saying that he kept the knife on the dresser in the bedroom because he was "afraid." Afraid of whom? In answer to this question, Tucker named the tall, husky young man who had admitted visiting the apartment at five o'clock on the day of the murder.

"He — he threatened to kill me," Tucker said.

Questioned now for the second time, the youth frankly admitted that he had threatened Felix Tucker.

"But I didn't really mean I intended to kill him," he explained. "I was just boiling mad, and meant for him to leave Minnie alone. I wanted him to keep his hands off her. I told him if he beat her again —"

"When was the last time he beat her?"

"This morning," the young man replied. "He beat and choked her. If you don't believe me, just ask the folks who live right next door to the Tuckers."

When a neighbor corroborated the young man's story, telling how she heard screams coming from the Tucker apartment early in the morning, and how Mrs. Tucker herself had told her that Felix had beaten and choked her that morning, police decided that it was high time to have a not-so-gentle tête-à-tête with the bereaved young husband.

Felix Tucker was shaken; he admitted beating his wife that morning.

"Minnie admitted she'd been having an affair with Brenner," he said, "and I guess I saw red. I was sorry afterward, but it was too late. And now she's dead."

The Chief spoke up suddenly — "You sure you didn't kill her?"

Tucker went pale.

"Why would I kill her, when I loved her so?" he cried. "You checked my alibi, didn't you? Didn't you admit I told the truth? If you really want to find the guy that killed Minnie, why don't you arrest Charley Brenner. I hated to tell you this — didn't want to blacken my wife's memory. But when I left home in the morning, she told me she wouldn't be there when I came home. She said she was leaving with Charley."

So once more the investigation shifted back to Charles Brenner.

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This time Brenner was willing to add details.

"Okay," he said. "I left there intending to meet her in another place, so folks wouldn't know we'd left together."

"Where were you going to take her?"

"To kinfolks — till she could get a divorce."

The Chief turned the evidence over in his mind. Who had the most provocative motive in this case? Everything pointed to Tucker as the criminal who fitted the crime. It had to be Tucker, and yet — there was that air-tight alibi.

Air-tight? How air-tight? The Chief decided to go over this business of the alibi again.

Tucker had said he left school at 4:20 and arrived at the shoe store on Dickerson Road at about 5:35. He stayed there, according to his story, until six o'clock, when he went home and found his wife murdered.

The morticians who examined the body reported that rigor mortis had not yet begun. But rigor mortis, the Chief reasoned to himself, is a very uncertain yardstick. It sets in from one to two hours after death, depending upon muscular, atmospheric and other conditions. Since there was no rigor present in the body, it was assumed that the crime had been committed within the past few minutes, when, as a matter of fact, it could have been an hour or even more before Tucker claimed to have found the body.

Another thing. Which of the suspects left the apartment by the rear door? According to all the testimony, the only person who might have left the apartment by the rear door was — Tucker. And that is where the footprint was found.

"Why did you do it, Tucker?" The Chief asked when he resumed questioning the husband a little later. He picked up the plaster cast of the footprint and held it up before Tucker's eyes.

"When you got off the bus on Dickerson Road, you slipped across the vacant lot to your back door. You went in the bedroom and found Minnie preparing to leave you. Blind with rage, you grabbed the butcher knife and plunged it into her back. Then you were smart enough to think that you might fasten the crime on another man, so you ran out the back door and crossed the field to Dickerson Road, where you established your alibi in that shoe store. Why not tell the truth?"

"Okay," said Tucker, breaking down at last, "I guess you've got me. I stabbed her, all right — stabbed her twice. The only reason I didn't stab her again was because I couldn't pull the knife out. I swore that if she left me she would go to a grave — not to another man."

On July 15, 1943, Felix Tucker paid the supreme penalty for the murder of his wife, at the Tennessee State Penitentiary, death by electrocution.

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Oilfield roustabout, theatrical promoter, hotel-worker, editor and newspaperman — these are a few of the things that have occupied first-rank mystery writer, Jim Thompson. Here he describes some of his experiences in the strange, exciting, often savage world of the bellboys — ". . . a topsy-turvy world of upside-down standards and constant temptation . . ."

BELLBOY

by Jim Thompson

A FEW YEARS AGO I MET ONE OF THE boys — by then a man, of course — I formerly hopped bells with. He was the owner of an automobile agency in a large southwestern city, and I also was enjoying some small success. Naturally, we fell to discussing the other boys we had known, those whose later lives were familiar to us.

One had been killed by the FBI while resisting arrest as a suspected kidnaper. One had been hopelessly crippled while attempting to blow up a safe. Two had committed suicide when still very young men. One had overdosed himself with salvarsan, bit his tongue off in a spasm of agony and drowned in his own blood.

Not a very pretty picture, but that was only part of it. Another boy of our acquaintance had become a renowned geologist, another a doctor and another a minister. Two others were managers of large hotels.

"All in all," my friend said, "I suppose about as many of us turned out all right as didn't. About the same percentage you'd find in any other group."

"That's true," I nodded, "the percentage is the same. But I don't think you'll find the division within another group so drastic. Take a bunch of grocery clerks starting out together, or a group of filing clerks or service station attendants. Some will get ahead, some won't. But the spread between them will be small and gradual. Five of them won't die violent deaths while the other five become relative big shots."

My friend frowned, thoughtfully. "Y'know," he hesitated, "it's kind of like it was on the job, isn't it? There wasn't any middle ground. You were either in or you were out."

"That's the way it looks. It did you a lot of good or a lot of harm."

"Which do you think it did you?"

"Well," I said, "I'm here."

In most pursuits, temptation

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stands on the sidelines. It does not grab but beckons, and once passed it is gone. But it was not thus in the luxury hotel of my day. Temptation followed you, placing herself in your path at every turn. And, paradoxically, succumbing to her often meant a reward, and resistance, punishment.

You worked in the hotel, but you worked for the guests. Your earnings, your very job depended upon their good will. So why offend a wealthy drunk by refusing to drink with him? Why snub a lovely and well-heeled widow when it was so easy to please her? And what about these people, anyway? If they were all wrong — these publicly acclaimed models of success and deportment — then who was right?

There was an unhealthy tendency to acquire complete contempt for the monied and a consuming regard for money. Money was apt to mean far too much and people nothing.

Living in a world of topsy-turvy standards and constant temptation, a boy could easily become involved in serious and long-lasting trouble. To survive in that world he had to be very, very lucky and have a fair degree of intelligence. But more than anything else, he had to be able to "take it," to absorb the not-to-be-avoided abnormal without being absorbed by it. Or, to state the matter simply, he needed a strong sense of humor.

If he had that, he was usually all right. Far from harming him, the hotel life would do him a lot of good.

It was during the big conventions of business and fraternal organizations that, as the saying was, the men were separated from the boys. They descended upon the hotel on an average of twice a month, and I grew to look upon them with a kind of delighted horror. They meant much money, but they also meant wracked nerves and utter physical exhaustion. All the incongruities and inconsistencies of hotel life were multiplied a dozen times over.

A day or so before a convention started, the hot-shots would drift into town. These were the professional bellboys — men — who traveled the country over and made a career of working the conventions. They knew all the angles and they played them all. They had to.

All bellboys paid a daily "tax" or "kick" to the captains for the privilege of working. The convention hot-shots not only paid this, but they also paid for their jobs. During an oil men's convention, for example, a four-day job sold for two hundred dollars plus a daily tax of ten dollars.

Since selling jobs is a federal offense, the question of what happened to all this money is one I consider too delicate to answer. But I will say that no hot-shot ever successfully appealed a bell captain's decision to the management. And one of the captains told me he was "goddamned lucky to hang onto a third of the take."

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The hot-shots received nothing for their money but the hotel's permission to go to work. There was no guarantee that they would not be fired or jailed thirty minutes after they stepped on the floor. There was no guarantee that they would be able to get — or hold onto — a uniform to work in. That was their headache, something to be worked out between them and the regular bellboys.

There were never more than twenty-five uniforms — but the number of bellboys during a convention often rose to a total of forty. And while the hot-shots were tough, the regulars were no pantywaists. So every change of shift marked the beginning of a battle with as many as three boys struggling for the same uniform.

Lockers were broken into. Tailor shop employees were threatened and bribed. Boys were tripped up and knocked down and sat on and stripped of their uniforms. One did not enter the locker room unless he was prepared to do battle.

Not all the quarrels arose over uniforms. Gypping on bells was the order of the day, and if a guy didn't like it he knew what he could do about it.

Those fights. They were strange, hideously fascinating affairs.

The combatants-to-be would first remove their uniforms and stow them away for safekeeping. Then, wordlessly and without preliminary, the fight would start. Its one rule was that no blows could be struck to the face. A knee in the groin was all right. A kick in the instep was all right, or a rupturing punch to the kidneys or a paralyzing blow to the heart. But a man's face must never be marked.

The fighters would weave their way through the crowded locker room, here passing in front of a boy who was shaving, there squeezing between a pair who were fastening one another's collars. No one paid any attention to them. No one tried to interfere. Everyone had more than enough to do to take care of himself.

Since all the boys were above average toughness and since one rarely knew a dirty trick unknown to the other, the fights usually ended in some kind of compromise. A no-gyp compact would be sworn to or an agreement would be arrived at whereby a uniform and a working-shift were shared. Often it was that way, but not always. Inevitably, some of the hot-shots were driven on and some of the regulars driven out.

Everyone had it in for everyone else. No matter what he made, no one was satisfied. There were thousands of dollars in cash among the bellboys as the end of a convention approached, and every boy knew it and wanted it. Not just part, but all. This resulted in twenty-four-hour-a-day dice games in the locker room — some of the biggest games I have ever seen, and I have seen big ones.

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The play would go on and on, with the players dropping out when they lost the dice, hopping bells for an hour or so, then getting back into the game as their turn came again. It was an all-or-nothing contest. No man was allowed to quit winner as long as the others wanted to play. If one was forced to drop out of the game, his winnings were impounded with one of the captains.

They could be maddening things, those "last man takes all" games. With forty boys involved, the odds were forty to one against your being the final victor. Yet I could never keep my money in my pocket where it belonged.

I would come down at night, and lay bets while I dressed. I might be cleaned out immediately, but more often than not I would win. Five hundred, a thousand, fourteen or fifteen hundred. But always the time came when I had to quit — leaving my winnings with the captain. (The captains, I should say, were well-chaperoned during their comings and goings.)

When the end of the convention came, and the final game with it, I sometimes had two or three thousand dollars "riding." And I would envision myself as that lucky last boy, a teenager retired on a modest fortune. Now, however, "piker bets" were disallowed. You faded what the other man wanted to shoot — and what he often chose to shoot was the exact amount of your winnings. The others had come into the game with big bankrolls and added to them. They could double up and triple up on the bets, cleaning you — or I should say, me — out in minutes. And, needless to say, they invariably did.

Still and all, thanks to a confidential talk with Allie Ivers, I did not do too badly in these games. I never got out with my temporarily won thousands. But by the process of "rat-holing" — surreptitiously palming an occasional ten or twenty — I often got away with hundreds.

The cops on the beat were aware of these dice games and frequently came in for a few minutes to watch the play. On the whole, they were like most of the other cops I have known — good, honest fellows doing a hard and thankless job at low pay. But there was an exception in the person of a cop called Red, a husky giant with close-set eyes who had admittedly donned a shield for what he could get out of it.

Red was always gambling and losing, then lying about the sum he had lost and grumbling that the game was crooked. He was always begging for a few dollars to get back into the game — the loan being repayable on a tomorrow that never arrived. The boys sneered at him, insulted him, profanely refused to fade when he was shooting. Still Red hung on, a whining, grumbling, insult-proof sponge.

I had been bell-hopping for something more than a year when Red tried to tap me for ten dollars. I told

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him to go to hell. More accurately, I told him I wouldn't lend him the sweat from my socks if he paid me Niagara Falls for interest.

"Why, Jesus Christ!" I protested, my voice cracking with irritation. "What's the matter with you, anyway? You're a cop — you're supposed to be someone. How in hell can you hang around here begging money from bellboys?"

"Aw, come on," he insisted, not in the least embarrassed. "What's ten bucks to you? You've got plenty of dough."

"Nothing doing," I said. "You've already four-bitted me out of five or six bucks. Chisel someone else."

"I'll pay it back. First thing tomorrow."

"Nuts."

I went on dressing, trying to ignore him, but he wouldn't give up. He didn't want the money to shoot craps with, he said. He didn't even want it for himself. He needed it for his wife and baby, for some medicine and groceries.

"Wife and baby?" I said. "I didn't know you were married."

"Sure, I am. Been married right along. Come on, Jimmie. I wouldn't ask you for it if I just didn't have to have it."

"Well," I hesitated, "I've got a family of my own to take care of. If I was sure you'd pay the dough back —"

"Tell you what I'll do," he said promptly. "I'll hock my nightstick with you. That's good security. You know I can't get by working very long without it."

"All right," I said. "I think I'm making a mistake, but —"

I gave him the ten and locked his nightstick in my locker.

When I came to work the following night, the locker had been broken open and the club was gone.

I was pretty sore, to put it mildly. But the situation appeared to have its bright side. Having done this to me, Red would doubtless steer clear of the hotel for some time to come.

I was starting to change clothes, consoling myself with the thought of Red-free nights sans whining and begging, when the locker-room door opened and in he came. He was grinning broadly. The nightstick was dangling from his wrist.

"About that club," he said. "A fellow over at the station house had an extra he wasn't usin'. He gave it to me."

"I see," I said.

"So I guess I'll just let you keep that other one."

"All right," I said.

"You don't mind, do you?" he grinned. "That's all right with you, ain't it?"

"Supposing it wasn't?" I said.

"Yeah?" He chuckled. "Supposin'?"

He went out, laughing openly. I went on dressing. I'd paid ten bucks to get the horse laugh, and I had to like it. I'd been dared not to like it.

Allie Ivers had come onto the night shift with me and knew of my

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loan to Red. He was as chagrined as I when I told him how Red had repaid the favor.

"You're not going to let him get away with it, are you?" he demanded. "Don't tell me you're just going to grin and take it!"

"What else can I do?"

"Fix the bastard's clock! Make him wish he'd never been born!"

"Yeah? And how am I going to do it?"

"I'll think of something," Allie promised.

He did think of something, and before the night was over. I listened to his scheme incredulously, by no means sure that he wasn't joking.

"You're kidding." I forced a laugh. "We can't do anything like that."

"Sure, we can," said Allie. "I'll get this babe I know to give him a fast play, make a date with him. She'll give him the number of one of the rooms the hotel's blocked off for the summer. When he comes in here — you'll have to slip him upstairs, of course — I'll —"

"But a — a *cop!*" I protested. "My God, Allie — to do that to a cop!"

"He's no cop. Wearing a uniform doesn't make a man a cop. What's the matter with you, anyway? I'm trying to do you a favor."

"Well, I —"

"I thought you trusted me."

"Well, I —"

I was still less than seventeen years old. And seventeen is seventeen, no matter what it has been through or up against. Moreover, despite my patent hardheadedness, I suffered from a deeply rooted feeling of inferiority. I wanted to be liked, and felt impelled to defer to those who gave me liking.

So I consented to Allie's plan. Two days later, at about two-thirty in the morning, Red beckoned to me furtively from the lobby side entrance.

I went out to the walk. He pressed a ten-dollar bill into my hand.

"Just playing a little joke on you," he said, giving me an amiable nudge in the ribs. "Okay? We're friends again?"

"What do you want?" I said.

He told me — although, of course, I already knew. Suddenly, as though it were another's voice speaking, I heard myself refusing.

"You've got no business up there. No one's got any business there. Those rooms are blocked off. They're too hot to stay in this time of year. Why, they haven't even got any bedding in 'em, and the telephones are discon —"

"Oh, yeah?" He grabbed me roughly by the arm. "Don't hand me that stuff! I got plenty of drag around this town. You try to crap me, an' I'll make you hard to catch."

"All right," I said. "If that's the way you want it."

He went around to the rear entrance, and I took him upstairs on the service elevator. He followed

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me down the hall to a small court room. Then, dismissing me with a contemptuous nod, he tapped on the door. It opened, and he stepped into the darkness.

There was a dull thud and a grunt, and the door closed again.

I went back to the rear landing where I waited nervously for Allie. He arrived shortly with Red's pants which he tossed down the incinerator chute. He similarly disposed of the key to the room.

"Everything's fine," he assured me, urging me toward the elevator. "Didn't hurt him a bit."

"But Allie, I — what's going to happen to him?"

"How do I know?" said Allie, cheerfully. "I'd say he'd probably sweat to death if he stays in that room very long. Good riddance, too."

"But —"

"Yes, sir," Allie mused, "it's quite a problem all right. He can't call for help. He can't use the telephone. And if he did manage to get down the fire escape, where would he go from there? What's he going to do without —"

"Allie," I said, "I just remembered something. They've got the water cut off in those rooms. We can't leave him there in this weather without any water."

"He's got plenty," said Allie. "I noticed there was quite a bit in the toilet bowl."

Whatever Red's sufferings were, during the two days he spent in that room, they could have been as nothing compared to mine. I was sick with fear and worry. Finally, on the night of the second day, I insisted on putting an end to Red's imprisonment.

Allie pointed out that Red could gain release from the room any time he chose to. All he had to do was pound on the door until someone heard him.

"But he can't do that! How would he explain —"

"I wonder," said Allie.

He was entirely prepared to leave Red in the room until thirst and heat and hunger drove him to some act of desperation. But seeing that I was on the point of a nervous collapse, he reluctantly gave in to me.

We filched the passkey from the desk, and a pair of porter's pants from the laundry. Early the next morning, some two hours before the end of our shift, we went up to the room.

The door was still locked from the outside. We unlocked it cautiously, looked in and went in.

Red was gone.

Obviously, he had left by the fire escape. But what he did after reaching it, I do not know. He may have crept down to the alley at night and hailed a cab. Or he may have gone up the escape to another room, helped himself to the occupant's clothes and then made his exit. I don't know how he got away from the hotel. Only that he did.

Allie and I learned that he had

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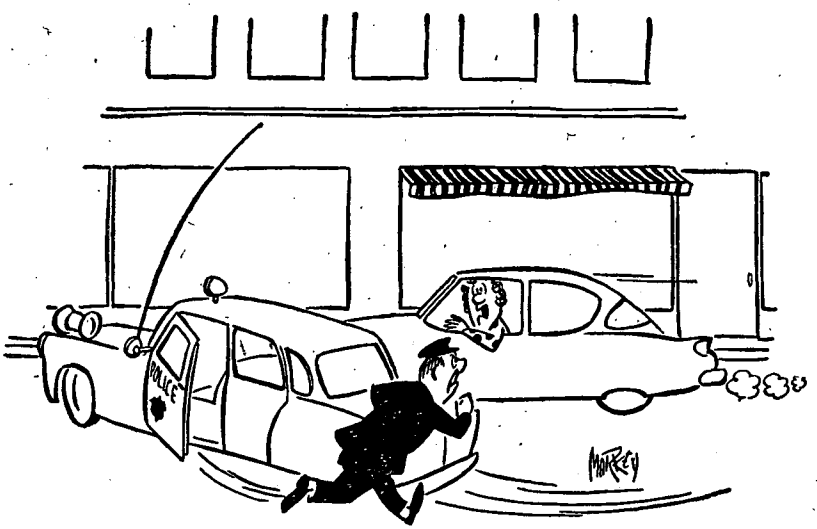
been fired from the force, presumably for absence without leave. Yet the grins and winks of the other cops hinted that this was not the sole reason for his dismissal. Apparently and literally, Red had been caught without his pants. As a result of this, we gathered, he had not only been fired but also had been "floated" out of town.

"Like a bum," said Allie. "And what's wrong with that?"



"Thank heaven you've come, Officer! I want to report a masher who's been following me all over town winking a big red light."

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The conventional rapist finds his victims on dark streets, in desolate neighborhoods. But Michael Anthony Garcia was not at all conventional. This dangerous criminal stalked his unlucky prey in broad daylight. And what's more, he sought them among the crowds of a suburban shopping center . . .

PORTRAIT OF A RAPIST

by Frances Lipsig

THE SCENE IS IN THE QUEENS County Courthouse, in Long Island City, which is just across the river from Manhattan. The date, January 31st, 1955. A rapist is on trial before an all-male jury. Women, defense counsel insisted, might be "prejudiced."

District Attorney Kerwin is addressing that jury in the saltiest language heard in a courtroom in years, but then this is a rather salty case:

"Take a look at this bum, this hoodlum, who forced women to commit acts so vile they never even dreamed of their existence! Take a good long look at him, and do what you must do with him, gentlemen of the jury!"

The man under attack by the Prosecutor is dark, studious-looking, a worn individual, young in years but old, the Prosecutor says, in vice and perversion. His pale-rimmed eyeglasses lend a thoughtful air to his face, making it almost inconceivable that he is the perpetrator of the accumulated evil that has been described in bits and snatches of sordid detail by victim after victim throughout the week. But here is the testimony . . . and here are the witnesses.

Michael Anthony Garcia is the name, an uneasy product of California, which had the dubious pleasure of harboring him for the first 24 years of his life, after which he was released upon New York City. A little man who fancied himself a big-shot.

Stalking quiet suburban towns in Queens and Nassau he stands accused of setting upon unwary women, first robbing them, then forcing them at gun-point to submit to rape and variations on the theme.

In turn a used car salesman, a gas station attendant and an odd-job man, Garcia found himself periodically strapped for funds. Any unimaginative clod can work, but for a man of his assorted talents there

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were, he felt, swifter roads to cash.

September of 1954 found him broke, without wife or female companion. Both his marriages had ended in desertion, and since neither of his wives had rushed to his aid on his day of reckoning, it is safe to assume that this little big-shot's loss was reckoned as a gain by each of these women.

Hit and run affairs were more to his liking. This was no mere figure of speech for Mr. Garcia. He hit to achieve his degenerate ends. He ran to save his neck.

By ambition, a gun-toting, swashbuckling public enemy who could terrorize whole communities . . . by capacity, a little punk whose mighty courage led him only in the direction of helpless women. And even there, he played it safe, or so he imagined, descending upon each of his victims when she was moored behind the steering wheel of her car, where free action is automatically restricted.

Where would an unemployed, skimpy, sallow-skinned, 139-pounder find women for his purpose? That was easy, if you were brave. Women everywhere follow a somewhat similar pattern when there's a little extra money around the house — in California, in New York, or in Little Rock, Arkansas. Garcia's marital experiences had taught him that much. They get into their cars, place that ready cash in their handbags, and set out on a shopping spree.

You get them then, all cozy and relaxed, right behind their steering wheels. You take a not-so-harmless air gun and prod it against their stomachs. Most of them will keel over and succumb out of sheer panic. That's the way it's done if you're a big-shot with guts and an aching desire eating at them.

Most of them keel right over — but not all. This is as much the story of the lady who didn't, as it is of Mike Garcia. Not a pretty story. . . .

The redoubtable Mr. Garcia was strolling the streets of Corona in the Fall of 1954. Temporarily, this was his home town where he occupied a furnished room whose rental fell due every Monday, a little inconvenience with which Garcia never made his peace. His most recent job as an auto salesman in nearby Flushing had petered out in spite of his exemplary conduct on the job. Occasionally (he remembered with regret) as much as $1,000 in collections had been entrusted to his care overnight. He had turned the money in intact every time. Garcia was never the man to rob where robbery could be pinned on him.

His rent overdue, either he found a job immediately and asked for an advance, or he faced eviction. At the thought of plodding through still another job his stomach turned over in distaste. There was a third alternative. Illegal maybe . . . dangerous, but fun.

He strode purposefully towards the subway.

Glen Oaks was his destination.

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The huge housing and shopping project, which has poured thousands of people into what was meadowlands only seven or eight years ago, was overrun with women and children. The women were a pleasant prospect. For Garcia's kind of business, they were top-drawer clientele. His business was rape. Robbery was just a side-line, since it is indisputable that a man must eat.

Garcia stopped short at the outskirts of the Glen Oaks parking lot. He saw a handsome woman in her late thirties, Mrs. Harriet Margit, hurry out of the department store, through the parking lot to her car. Entering her car, with Garcia unobtrusively just behind, she leaned forward to shut the front door, but met with an obstruction. The sallow little fellow, replete with sunglasses and a snap brim hat tilted low over his eyes, blocked the entrance. One hand rested a gun on the seat tilted upwards at her head. "Move over," was the command in a tone devoid of expression. "And drive. Drive smoothly, and smile occasionally like nothing's wrong because I'm not afraid to use this gun."

In a stupor, Mrs. Margit obeyed. After driving a few blocks, she found her voice: "I'm going to have a baby very soon," she pleaded. "I wonder, could you let me go? I'll give you whatever I have in my bag, gladly."

"You'll do that anyway," came the thin-voiced monotone, while his hands were busy extracting the few bills from Mrs. Margit's wallet. "Only three dollars," he muttered in disgust, "but you'll make up for that."

In a little while they reached Southern State Parkway. "Pull up now," he ordered, pointing to a patch of woods off the road. Maniacally, then insatiably, the creature subjected her to continuous assaults. Over and over again, in the mind of the woman, ran the lament: "My baby will be born dead. My baby will never be born. Better if he kills me now."

Much later she found herself wandering home, disheveled, dazed, and in shock. When she reached her own front walk a nausea which was to last for days washed over her accompanied by an upsurge of hysteria. Shrieking, laughing, she was incoherent when neighbors found her. She was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. "He killed my baby" was all she could say until sedatives had been applied.

The car turned up later that night, parked on a lonely street miles from Glen Oaks, and devoid of fingerprints.

Mrs. Margit's story was a miserable duplicate of the rape reported by Gay Robbins just a few weeks earlier . . . and that of Mrs. Evelyn Dain just prior to that. All three attacks had taken place in the same general area. Similarities rushed in on each other: the same method of gaining access to the car and identical deviation from the sexual norm.

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It tore out of Mrs. Margit's horrified lips in an agony of unmerited shame. The police turned to the wooded section of Southern State Parkway where the car had been forced to a halt. Nothing there. No trace, just as they could find no trace of the assailant on either of the prior rape complaints.

The description of the deviate furnished by Harriet Margit matched in every detail those given by the earlier victims. However, although these descriptions would be helpful in a line-up, they were of little assistance at this point, since every fifth or sixth man walking the streets of Long Island was of medium height with dark eyes which a woman in terror could describe as "brooding and horrible."

A full-scale manhunt was set in motion, netting the Police Department nothing but a few suspects who had to be released in a few days. Weeks elapsed, and the police were at a standstill until late December.

Meanwhile police efforts to trap the rapist moved along with constant urgency. A heavy concentration was maintained on department store parking lots and major food shops, where scores of women are necessarily on the move. The police were operating on a proven theory: once an area grows familiar by practice, the criminal continues compulsively to draw his victims from it; and once a method of attack proves successful, he repeats it without alteration.

A fresh tactic was employed. The New York City Police numbers many attractive young women whose efforts have gone far as decoys. These were deployed now on shopping expeditions in each of the major department stores in Long Island. They flashed rolls of bills in an effort to entice the fugitive, but he seemed to possess the instincts of a hunted animal. He steered clear of plants and decoys, and bided his time.

Three down, in a brief span of months. How many more to go?

Mrs. Ann Houser was the next. En route to her car, under identical circumstances as her predecessors, after a few hours in a department store, she was set upon as she was about to close the car door. "Move over, move fast, drive easy." A black gun with a red star was pointed at her head.

This was a page out of the newspapers, and for a moment, Ann Houser considered it a practical joke. Suddenly, she knew that it was not, and she would have none of it. She lunged at the window and dragged it down, shouting for help at the top of her voice. He beat her with his clenched fists, and attempted to stifle the sound by covering her mouth with his hand, but there was no holding this little woman . . . this quiet little librarian with the generally modulated voice. He threw open the door of the car and lost himself in the crush of the crowd. No one had heard Ann Houser's cries.

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But now there was a variation in the pattern — the variation for which the police were seeking. Behind him, on the steering wheel, the rapist had left a perfect set of fingerprints. Quickly they were dusted, the entire wheel removed and sent to the laboratory. Photographs of the prints were filed, after careful check for his identity proved unsuccessful.

To the newspapers the police department released a report of no progress. But the circle was narrowing. To keep that process going, it was vital that the fugitive be kept in total ignorance of his slip-up.

Without fear, without knowledge of his carelessness, the rapist plotted his next encounter.

Somewhere on Long Island a young woman was sipping her morning coffee with no thought to what the day would bring, beyond the new beige coat for which she was shopping. "Something dramatic this time," she decided. "I'll try Bloomingdale's Fresh Meadows."

Something dramatic was what the day held in store for her, though hardly of the variety she had in mind. It was drama touched by horror.

In his little room in Corona, Garcia was busying himself about the day ahead as well.

He tossed a coin. Heads for Jamaica, tails for Fresh Meadows. Tails had it, and he set out whistling and planning strategy.

He passed two men idling at an intersection near a market. "Cops," he muttered while he passed them. "Go back to your newspapers, boys," he laughed.

But the detectives around town had finished their morning newspapers, and at this moment a score of them had converged on every major shopping area, armed with powerful binoculars to train down at the parking lots from buildings directly adjoining. Not a strategic site was omitted.

At the edge of the parking lot Garcia's movements turned furtive.

In the General Manager's office above the Woolworth store, four flights up, Detective LoPiccolo trained his binoculars down on the parking lot. In a few minutes he sighted a slight, almost childish male figure which seemed to be heading nowhere. Down below Detectives McKenna and Leinbach moved around unobtrusively, occasionally glancing upwards, as though to inspect the skies for the weather.

There was a pre-arranged signal between the officers, which would flash a warning the moment a suspect was spotted.

LoPiccolo peered into the binoculars: what he saw strengthened his suspicions: the furtive figure darted quick glances into two automobiles, then moved on to a third. Without further delay, Officer LoPiccolo flashed his signal.

It was caught on the instant by Detective Leinbach who flashed it to McKenna. Cars were pulling in

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and backing out. Chattering women holding children by the hand were everywhere. Three cars in a row suddenly backed out and blocked off the direction in which the two detectives were heading, obscuring their vision for a minute.

That minute was long enough.

The slender figure with the sinuous glide had disappeared. The wind carried the sound of a thin scream, from another direction of the parking lot. Laughter? Or a cry for help? High-pitched feminine voices everywhere made it hard to place.

The two detectives separated, moving urgently from spot to spot, their eyes inspecting the interior of each car they passed, alerted for the sight or sound of an attack. If that sound they heard had been a scream. . . .

The blonde was in trouble. The rapist sat next to her on the car seat, and the black gun was nudging her between the breasts. But she was a determined young lady and she was out for a coat and a coat was all she intended to get. She lunged at the wiry little figure, scratching and tearing with her nails, and when she succeeded in releasing his hand from her mouth for a moment, she sent a high-pitched, terrified shriek out into the area — a sound muffled by surrounding sounds and pushed back into silence by the rapist. He beat her with his clenched fists, but she fought right back and fear gave her strength and her shoes provided weapons.

The struggle was brief. His fists had little effect. Spiked heels seemed to be coming at him from every direction. There was a pain in his groin. His back was wrenched. His neck was bleeding.

He tore out of the car, caught his heel, and tumbled over in the gravel. Quickly he rose, but before he could move a gun was poked into his ribs.

He didn't even struggle. The three detectives took an unresisting prisoner and headed for headquarters.

The rest was swift, and damning. It was all a mistake, Mike Garcia protested. He had been running for a bus and that's all he knew when he was set upon by the brutal policemen. He had never seen the blonde before. The scratches, the bruises were something he'd picked up when he fell down an unidentified flight of stairs. And as for the black gun found in his possession, anyone could see it wasn't real. It belonged to a young boy in Corona. He was planning to return it later that day. The name? It slipped his memory.

Before the day was over Garcia broke down and signed a full confession.

In the months preceding his trial, Michael Anthony Garcia was not idle. Cheated now of further claims to glory; forever exempt from participation in the one major crime every petty criminal harbors way back in his mind, Garcia planned new strategy.

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Garcia had been lodged in the same tier of cells with one Richard Connors, slated as star-witness against Ernest Lee Edwards in the one dollar surf-murder of a Brooklyn fisherman, Howard Englander.

After Connors was transferred to the Kings County jail, Garcia came forward with the claim that Connors had been intimidated by the Brooklyn District Attorney. He had it straight from his friend's lips. The District Attorney of Kings County, Garcia stated, had coerced Connors into offering testimony against Edwards by describing, in horrible detail, the sensations of a man about to be put to death in the electric chair. If Connors hoped to escape that fate, he had better take the stand and testify against Edwards. That, said Garcia, was the truth and the whole truth.

But the accused Edwards' attorney, indicated he placed no reliance on this far-fetched tale. Edwards has since been tried and convicted for his crime.

Meanwhile, Detective Cullen Cregan, fingerprint expert, came in with his report. Garcia's fingerprints and those picked off the steering wheel in the earlier rape case, matched in all important details. There were, in fact, 35 points of similarity.

Now his mind turned to another cellmate, a man with a few troubles of his own. This cellmate was accused of murdering his fiancee. This, perhaps, was the opportunity for publicity on a larger scale than his own petty crimes had warranted. Garcia's sordid little saga had been tucked away on the inside pages of the newspapers — a far cry from the page one spot he coveted.

A conference with the Queens County District Attorney was promptly arranged. It appeared that the accused man had bared his soul to Mike Garcia. He had confessed to the murder of his fiancee, said Garcia, and he was prepared to take the stand to testify against his erstwhile buddy.

But Garcia's tactics where whimsical and shifting. Suddenly, he demanded a new hearing. He had accusations of the gravest importance, he said, to level at the Queens District Attorney James McGrattan.

On the stand, Garcia struck a pose of theatrical grandeur. Pulling two 25-cent pieces out of his pockets, he hurled them at the feet of the Prosecutor. "I won't be your Judas," he shouted righteously. "Take back your pieces of silver! The confession was a lie!"

Someone had promised to go easy with Garcia in his own case, he claimed, if he pinned down the rap against his cellmate. But he couldn't do such a dishonorable thing. He was going to tell the truth, only the truth. When the two theoretically tainted coins were returned to Garcia as his property, he promptly pocketed them.

Nor did he testify against his cellmate after all. The man was tried

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and acquitted of the murder charge.

Back to his cell went Garcia, to fester in his state of unending obscurity despite his many efforts to break into the limelight. No pistols . . . no women in parked cars . . . nothing to while away the weary jail hours.

There was an interruption at last. The Court ordered Garcia sent to Kings County Hospital for psychopathic observation. But even this break in the routine didn't last. Kings County declared him legally sane and shipped him back to Queens.

On January 31st, 1955 the People's case against the rapist came up for trial, with 27 counts levelled against him consisting of grand larceny, rape and kidnaping.

Garcia took unto himself one last fling at fame. At one point in the proceedings he broke away from his counsel, and choking with fury he pointed a finger at the Presiding Judge, shouting: "It's not your neck or the D.A.'s that's at stake. It's mine." Whatever Garcia hoped to gain, his attempt was fruitless, because at 5:20 p.m. on Friday, February 4th, 1955, after deliberation of one hour and 20 minutes, the jury's verdict came in: Guilty on 16 counts.

Mike Garcia was ordered re-examined by the Kings County alienists, and on March 14th, 1955, after being adjudged sane, he was sentenced to a total of 95–150 years plus life, these sentences to run concurrently. Twenty years to life for kidnaping was the greatest single penalty Garcia received. He will therefore be eligible for parole in a minimum of thirteen years. Meanwhile, the women of suburbia can rest a bit easier, confident that one rapist, at least, is safely behind bars.

(*Note: For obvious reasons the names Harriet Margit, Gay Robbins, Evelyn Dain and Ann Houser are fictitious.*)

Solution to Mystery Puzzle on page 95

The Inspector's hunch was that it was an inside job — Mrs. Lyman, "a good woman," would not have been entertaining in her nightgown. Mrs. Wilson, however, was small, and it takes strength to strangle a woman with a stocking. Mr. Lyman seemed like a possibility, and the Inspector tricked him into showing he knew where the new clock was — the clock that required "close inspection" to reveal it was a clock. This indicated he had been in the apartment since the new clock had come yesterday.

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